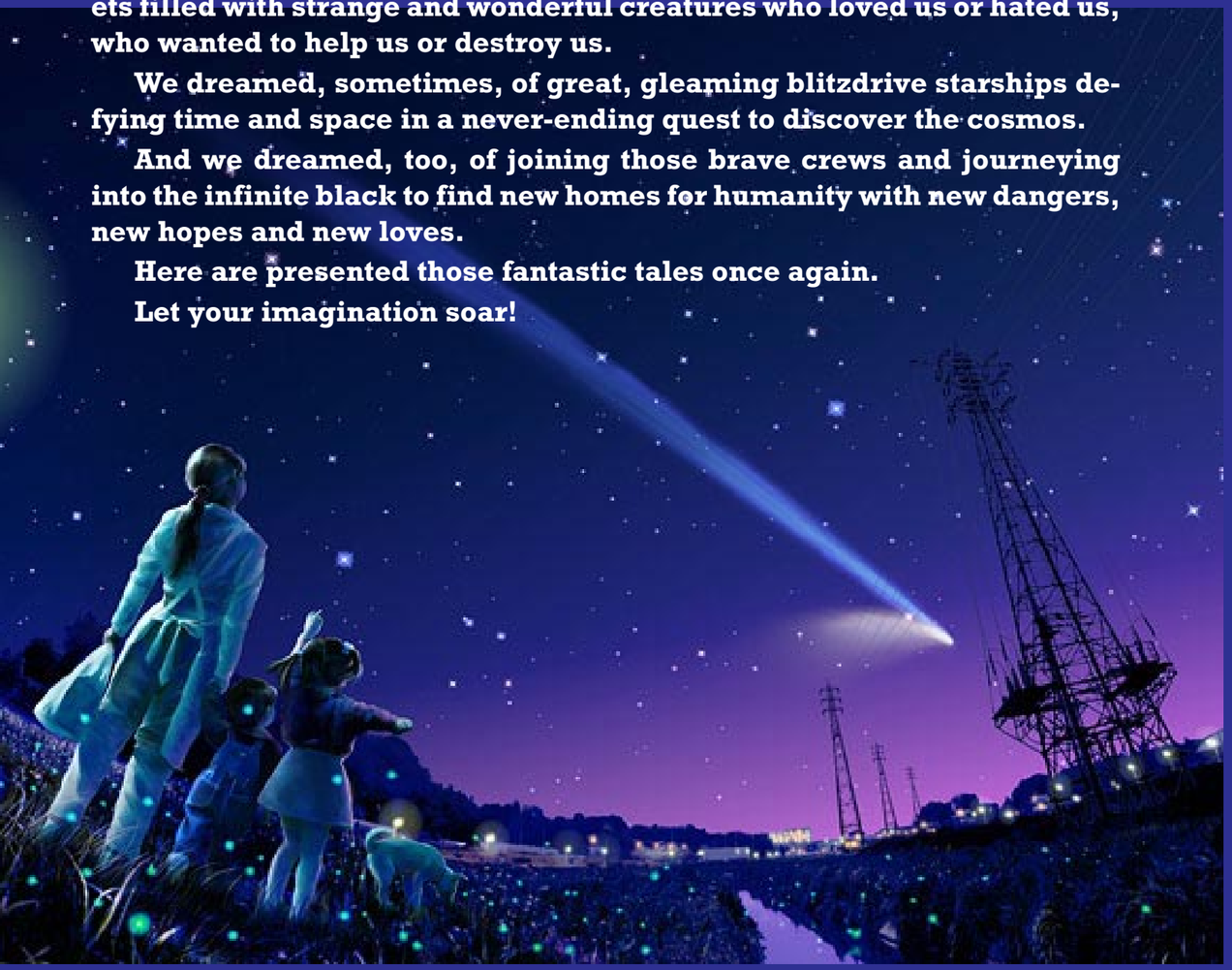
Once upon a cosmic time, when we were younger and not quite so filled with the world, we could believe that the universe was the Milky Way Galaxy and that all those other stars were ringed with habitable planets filled with strange and wonderful creatures who loved us or hated us, who wanted to help us or destroy us.

We dreamed, sometimes, of great, gleaming blitzdrive starships defying time and space in a never-ending quest to discover the cosmos.

And we dreamed, too, of joining those brave crews and journeying into the infinite black to find new homes for humanity with new dangers, new hopes and new loves.

Here are presented those fantastic tales once again.

Let your imagination soar!



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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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Long Ago, Far Away

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THE CROWDED EARTH

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1. Harry Collins—1997

The telescreen lit up promptly at eight a.m. Smiling Brad came on with his usual greeting. ''Good morning—it's a beautiful day in Chicagee!''

Harry Collins rolled over and twitched off the receiver. ''This I doubt,'' he muttered. He sat up and reached into the closet for his clothing.

Visitors—particularly feminine ones—were always exclaiming over the advantages of Harry's apartment. ''So convenient,'' they would say. ''Everything handy, right within reach. And think of all the extra steps you save!''

Of course most of them were just being polite and trying to cheer Harry up. They knew damned well that he wasn't living in one room through any choice of his own. The Housing Act was something you just couldn't get around; not in Chicagee these days. A bachelor was entitled to one room—no more and no less. And even though Harry was making a speedy buck at the agency, he couldn't hope to beat the regulations.

There was only one way to beat them and that was to get married. Marriage would automatically entitle him to two rooms—if he could find them someplace.

More than a few of his feminine visitors had hinted at just that, but Harry didn't respond. Marriage was no solution, the way he figured it. He knew that he couldn't hope to locate a two-room apartment any closer than eighty miles away. It was bad enough driving forty miles to and from work every morning and night without doubling the distance. If he did find a bigger place, that would mean a three-hour trip each way on one of the commutrains, and the commutrains were murder. The Black Hole of Calcutta, on wheels.

But then, everything was murder, Harry reflected, as he stepped from the toilet to the sink, from the sink to the stove, from the stove to the table.

Powdered eggs for breakfast. That was murder, too. But it was a fast, cheap meal, easy to prepare, and the ingredients didn't waste a lot of storage space. The only trouble was, he hated the way they tasted. Harry wished he had time to eat his breakfasts in a restaurant. He could afford the price, but he couldn't afford to wait in line more than a half-hour or so. His office schedule at the agency started promptly at ten-thirty. And he didn't get out until three-thirty; it was a long, hard five-hour day. Sometimes he wished he worked in the New Philly area, where a four-hour day was the rule. But he supposed that wouldn't mean any real saving in time, because he'd have to live further out. What was the population in New Philly now? Something like 63,000,000, wasn't it? Chicagee was much smaller—only 38,000,000, this year.

This year. Harry shook his head and took a gulp of the Instantea. Yes, this year the population was 38,000,000, and the boundaries of the community extended north to what used to be the old Milwaukee and south past Gary. What would it be like next year, and the year following?

Lately that question had begun to haunt Harry. He couldn't quite figure out why. After all, it was none of his business, really. He had a good job, security, a nice place just two hours from the Loop. He even drove his own car. What more could he ask?

And why did he have to start the day like this, with a blinding headache?

Harry finished his Instantea and considered the matter. Yes, it was beginning again, just as it had on almost every morning for the past month. He'd sit down at the table, eat his usual breakfast, and end up with a headache. Why?

It wasn't the food; for a while he'd deliberately varied his diet, but that didn't make any difference. And he'd had his usual monthly checkup not more than ten days ago, only to be assured there was nothing wrong with him. Still, the headaches persisted. Every morning, when he'd sit down and jerk his head to the left like this—

That was it. Jerking his head to the left. It always seemed to trigger the pain. But why? And where had he picked up this habit of jerking his head to the left?

Harry didn't know.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost nine, now. High time that he got started. He reached over to the interapartment video and dialled the garage downstairs.

"Bill," he said. "Can you bring my car around to Number Three?"

The tiny face in the hand-screen grinned sheepishly. "Mr. Collins, ain't it? Gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Collins. Night crew took on a new man, he must have futzed around with the lists, and I can't find your number."

Harry sighed. "It's one-eight-seven-three-dash-five," he said. "Light blue Pax, two-

seater. Do you want the license number, too?''

''No, just your parking number. I'll recognize it when I see it. But God only knows what level it's on. That night man really—''

''Never mind,'' Harry interrupted. ''How soon?''

''Twenty minutes or so. Maybe half an hour.''

''Half an hour? I'll be late. Hurry it up!''

Harry clicked the video and shook his head. Half an hour! Well, you had to expect these things if you wanted to be independent and do your own driving today. If he wanted to work his priority through the office, he could get his application honored on the I.C. Line within a month. But the I.C. was just another commutrain, and he couldn't take it. Standing and swaying for almost two hours, fighting the crowds, battling his way in and out of the sidewalk escalators. Besides, there was always the danger of being crushed. He'd seen an old man trampled to death on a Michigan Boulevard escalator-feeder, and he'd never forgotten it.

Being afraid was only a partial reason for his reluctance to change. The worst thing, for Harry, was the thought of all those people; the forced bodily contact, the awareness of smothered breathing, odors, and the crushing confinement of flesh against flesh. It was bad enough in the lines, or on the streets. The commutrain was just too much.

Yet, as a small boy, Harry could remember the day when he'd loved such trips. Sitting there looking out of the window as the scenery whirled past—that was always a thrill when you were a little kid. How long ago had that been? More than twenty years, wasn't it?

Now there weren't any seats, and no windows. Which was just as well, probably, because the scenery didn't whirl past any more, either. Instead, there was a stop at every station on the line, and a constant battle as people jockeyed for position to reach the exit-doors in time.

No, the car was better.

Harry reached for a container in the cabinet and poured out a couple of aspirystamines. That ought to help the headache. At least until he got to the office. Then he could start with the daily quota of yellowjackets. Meanwhile, getting out on the street might help him, too. A shame there wasn't a window in this apartment, but then, what good would it do, really? All he could see through it would be the next apartment.

He shrugged and picked up his coat. Nine-thirty, time to go downstairs. Maybe the car would be located sooner than Bill had promised; after all, he had nine assistants, and not everybody went to work on this first daylight shift.

Harry walked down the hall and punched the elevator button. He looked at the indicator, watched the red band move towards the numeral of this floor, then sweep past it.

''Full up!'' he muttered. ''Oh, well.''

He reached out and touched both sides of the corridor. That was another thing he disliked; these narrow corridors. Two people could scarcely squeeze past one another without touching. Of course, it did save space to build apartments this way, and space was at a premium. But Harry couldn't get used to it. Now he remembered some of the old

buildings that were still around when he was a little boy—

The headache seemed to be getting worse instead of better. Harry looked at the indicator above the other elevator entrance. The red band was crawling upward, passing him to stop on 48. That was the top floor. Now it was moving down, down; stopping on 47, 46, 45, 44, 43, and—here it was!

"Stand back, please!" said the tape. Harry did his best to oblige, but there wasn't much room. A good two dozen of his upstairs neighbors jammed the compartment. Harry thought he recognized one or two of the men, but he couldn't be sure. There were so many people, so many faces. After a while it got so they all seemed to look alike. Yes, and breathed alike, and felt alike when you were squeezed up against them, and you were always being squeezed up against them, wherever you went. And you could smell them, and hear them wheeze and cough, and you went falling down with them into a bottomless pit where your head began to throb and throb and it was hard to move away from all that heat and pressure. It was hard enough just to keep from screaming—

Then the door opened and Harry was catapulted out into the lobby. The mob behind him pushed and clawed because they were in a hurry; they were always in a hurry these days, and if you got in their way they'd trample you down like that old man had been trampled down; there was no room for one man in a crowd any more.

Harry blinked and shook his head.

He gripped the edge of the wall and clung there in an effort to avoid being swept out of the lobby completely. His hands were sticky with perspiration. They slipped off as he slowly inched his way back through the crush of the mob.

"Wait for me!" he called. "Wait for me, I'm going down!" But his voice was lost in the maelstrom of sound just as his body was lost in the maelstrom of motion. Besides, an automatic elevator cannot hear. It is merely a mechanism that goes up and down, just like the other mechanisms that go in and out, or around and around, and you get caught up in them the way a squirrel gets caught in a squirrel-cage and you race and race, and the best you can hope for is to keep up with the machinery.

The elevator door clanged shut before Harry could reach it. He waited for another car to arrive, and this time he stood aside as the crowd emerged, then darted in behind them.

The car descended to the first garage level, and Harry stood gulping gratefully in the comparative isolation. There weren't more than ten people accompanying him.

He emerged on the ramp, gave his number to the attendant, and waved at Bill in his office. Bill seemed to recognize him; at least he nodded, briefly. No sense trying to talk—not in this sullen subterranea, filled with the booming echo of exhausts, the despairing shriek of brakes. Headlights flickered in the darkness as cars whirled past, ascending and descending on the loading platforms. The signal systems winked from the walls, and tires screeched defiance to the warning bells.

Old-fashioned theologians, Harry remembered, used to argue whether there really was a Hell, and if so, had it been created by God or the Devil? Too bad they weren't around today to get an answer to their questions. There was a Hell, and it had been created by General Motors.

Harry's temples began to throb. Through blurred eyes, he saw the attendant beckoning him down the line to a platform marked Check-Out #3. He stood there with a cluster of others, waiting.

What was the matter with him today, anyway? First the headache, and now his feet were hurting. Standing around waiting, that's what did it. This eternal waiting. When he was a kid, the grownups were always complaining about the long seven-hour work days and how they cut into their leisure time. Well, maybe they had reason to gripe, but at least there was some leisure before work began or after it was through. Now that extra time was consumed in waiting. Standing in line, standing in crowds, wearing yourself out doing nothing.

Still, this time it wasn't really so bad. Within ten minutes the light blue Pax rolled up before him. Harry climbed in as the attendant slid out from behind the wheel and prepared to leave.

Then a fat man appeared, running along the ramp. He gestured wildly with a plump thumb. Harry nodded briefly, and the fat man hurled himself into the seat beside him and slammed the door.

They were off. Harry read the signals impatiently, waiting for the green Go. The moment he saw it he gunned his motor and got the car up to twenty-two and zipped away.

That's what he liked, that's what he always waited for. Of course it was dangerous, here in the tunnel system under the garage, but Harry always got a thrill out of speed. The Pax could do thirty-five or even forty, probably, on a theoretical open road. Still, twenty-two was enough to satisfy Harry.

He whizzed up the ramp, turned, headed for the street-level, then braked and waited for the signal to emerge.

Harsh sunlight pierced the smog and he felt his eyes watering. Now the street noises assailed his ears; the grinding of gears, the revving of motors. But at least the total volume was lower, and with the windows tightly closed against the acrid air, he could hear.

Turning to the fat man beside him he said, "Hello, Frazer. What's the urgency?"

"Got to get downtown before eleven," the fat man answered. "Board meeting today, but I forgot about it. Knew I wouldn't have time to wait for the car, and I was hoping I'd find someone who'd give me a lift. Lucky for me that you came along when you did."

Harry nodded but did not reply. At the moment he was trying to edge into the traffic beyond. It flowed, bumper to bumper, in a steady stream; a stream moving at the uniform and prescribed rate of fifteen miles per hour. He released his brakes and the Pax nosed forward until a truck sounded its horn in ominous warning. The noise hurt Harry's head; he winced and grimaced.

"What's the matter?" asked Frazer.

"Headache," Harry muttered. He menaced a Chevsoto with his bumper. "Damn it, I thought they didn't allow those big four-passenger jobs on this arterial during rush hours!" Gradually he managed to turn until he was in the righthand lane. "There," he said. "We're off."

And so they were, for all of three minutes, with the speed set at fifteen on autopilot. Then a signal went into action somewhere up ahead, and the procession halted. Harry

flicked his switch. As was customary, horns sounded indignantly on all sides—a mechanical protest against a mechanical obstruction. Harry winced again.

"Hangover?" Frazer asked, solicitously. "Try aspirystamine."

Harry shook his head. "No hangover. And I've already taken three, thanks. Nothing does any good. So I guess it's just up to you."

"Up to me?" Frazer was genuinely puzzled. "What can I do about your headaches?"

"You're on the Board of City Planners, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, I've got a suggestion for you to give to them. Tell them to start planning to drop a couple of heavy thermo-nucs on this area. Clean out twenty or thirty million people. We'd never miss 'em."

Frazer chuckled wryly. "I wish I had a buck for every time I've heard that suggestion."

"Ever stop to think why you hear it so often? It's because everybody feels the same way—we can't take being hemmed in like this."

"Well, a bomb wouldn't help. You know that." Frazer pursed his lips. "Robertson figured out what would happen, with the chain-reaction."

* * * * *

Harry glanced sideways at his companion as the car started forward once again. "I've always wondered about that," he said. "Seriously, I mean. Is the story really true, or is it just some more of this government propaganda you fellows like to hand out?"

Frazer sighed. "It's true, all right. There was a scientist named Robertson, and he did come up with the thermo-nuc formula, way back in '75. Proved it, too. Use what he developed and the chain-reaction would never end. Scientists in other countries tested the theory and agreed; there was no collusion, it just worked out that way on a practical basis. Hasn't been a war since—what more proof do you want?"

"Well, couldn't they just use some of the old-fashioned hydrogen bombs?"

"Be sensible, man! Once a war started, no nation could resist the temptation to go all-out. Fortunately, everyone realizes that. So we have peace. Permanent peace."

"I'll take a good war anytime, in preference to this."

"Harry, you don't know what you're talking about. You aren't so young that you can't remember what it was like in the old days. Everybody living in fear, waiting for the bombs to fall. People dying of disease and worried about dying from radiation and fallout. All the international rivalries, the power-politics, the eternal pressures and constant crises. Nobody in his right mind would want to go back to that. We've come a mighty long way in the last twenty years or so."

Harry switched to autopilot and sat back. "Maybe that's the trouble," he said. "Maybe we've come too far, too fast. I wasn't kidding about dropping those thermo-nucs, either. Something has to be done. We can't go on like this indefinitely. Why doesn't the Board come up with an answer?"

Frazer shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You think we haven't tried, aren't trying now? We're aware of the situation as well as you are—and then some. But there's no easy solu-

tion. The population just keeps growing, that's all. No war to cut it down, contagious diseases at a minimum, average life-expectancy up to ninety years or better. Naturally, this results in a problem. But a bomb won't help bring about any permanent solution. Besides, this isn't a local matter, or even a national one. It's global. What do you think those summit meetings are all about?''

''What about birth control?'' Harry asked. ''Why don't they really get behind an emigration movement?''

''We can't limit procreation by law. You know that.'' Frazer peered out at the swarming streams on the sidewalk levels. ''It's more than a religious or a political question—it's a social one. People want kids. They can afford them. Besides, the Housing Act is set up so that having kids is just about the only way you can ever get into larger living-quarters.''

''Couldn't they try reverse-psychology? I mean, grant priority to people who are willing to be sterilized?''

''They tried it, on a limited experimental scale, about three years ago out on the West Coast.''

''I never heard anything about it.''

''Damned right you didn't,'' Frazer replied, grimly. ''They kept the whole project under wraps, and for a good reason. The publicity might have wrecked the Administration.''

''What happened?''

''What do you suppose happened? There were riots. Do you think a man and his wife and three kids, living in three rooms, liked the idea of standing by and watching a sterilized couple enjoy a four-room place with lawn space? Things got pretty ugly, let me tell you. There was a rumor going around that the country was in the hands of homosexuals—the churches were up in arms—and if that wasn't bad enough, we had to face up to the primary problem. There just wasn't, just isn't, enough space. Not in areas suitable for maintaining a population. Mountains are still mountains and deserts are still deserts. Maybe we can put up housing in such regions, but who can live there? Even with decentralization going full blast, people must live within reasonable access to their work. No, we're just running out of room.''

Again the car halted on signal. Over the blasting of the horns, Harry repeated his query about emigration.

Frazer shook his head, but made no attempt to reply until the horns had quieted and they were under way once more.

''As for emigration, we're just getting some of our own medicine in return. About eighty years ago, we clamped down and closed the door on immigrants; established a quota. Now the same quota is being used against us, and you can't really blame other nations for it. They're facing worse population increases than we are. Look at the African Federation, and what's happened there, in spite of all the wealth! And South America is even worse, in spite of all the reclamation projects. Fifteen years ago, when they cleared out the Amazon Basin, they thought they'd have enough room for fifty years to come. And now look at it—two hundred million, that's the latest figure we've got.''

"So what's the answer?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. If it wasn't for hydroponics and the Ag Culture controls, we'd be licked right now. As it is, we can still supply enough food, and the old supply-and-demand takes care of the economy as a whole. I have no recommendations for an overall solution, or even a regional one. My job, the Board's job, is regulating housing and traffic and transportation in Chicagee. That's about all you can expect us to handle."

Again they jolted to a stop and the horns howled all around them. Harry sat there until a muscle in the side of his jaw began to twitch. Suddenly he pounded on the horn with both fists.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "For the love of Heaven, shut up!"

Abruptly he slumped back. "Sorry," he mumbled. "It's my damned headache. I—I've got to get out of this."

"Job getting you down?"

"No. It's a good job. At least everybody tells me so. Twenty-five hours a week, three hundred bucks. The car. The room. The telescreen and liquor and yellowjackets. Plenty of time to kill. Unless it's the time that's killing me."

"But—what do you want?"

Harry stepped on the accelerator and they inched along. Now the street widened into eight traffic lanes and the big semis joined the procession on the edge of the downtown area.

"I want out," Harry said. "Out of this."

"Don't you ever visit the National Preserves?" Frazer asked.

"Sure I do. Fly up every vacation. Take a tame plane to a tame government resort and catch my quota of two tame fish. Great sport! If I got married, I'd be entitled to four tame fish. But that's not what I want. I want what my father used to talk about. I want to drive into the country, without a permit, mind you; just to drive wherever I like. I want to see cows and chickens and trees and lakes and sky."

"You sound like a Naturalist."

"Don't sneer. Maybe the Naturalists are right. Maybe we ought to cut out all this phoney progress and phoney peace that passeth all understanding. I'm no liberal, don't get me wrong, but sometimes I think the Naturalists have the only answer."

"But what can you do about it?" Frazer murmured. "Suppose for the sake of argument that they are right. How can you change things? We can't just will ourselves to stop growing, and we can't legislate against biology. More people, in better health, with more free time, are just bound to have more offspring. It's inevitable, under the circumstances. And neither you nor I nor anyone has the right to condemn millions upon millions of others to death through war or disease."

"I know," Harry said. "It's hopeless, I guess. All the same, I want out." He wet his lips. "Frazer, you're on the Board here. You've got connections higher up. If I could only get a chance to transfer to Ag Culture, go on one of those farms as a worker—"

Frazer shook his head. "Sorry, Harry. You know the situation there, I'm sure. Right now there's roughly ninety million approved applications on file. Everybody wants to

get into Ag Culture.''

''But couldn't I just buy some land, get a government contract for foodstuffs?''

''Have you got the bucks? A minimum forty acres leased from one of the farm corporations will cost you two hundred thousand at the very least, not counting equipment.'' He paused. ''Besides, there's Vocational Apt. What did your tests show?''

''You're right,'' Harry said. ''I'm supposed to be an agency man. An agency man until I die. Or retire on my pension, at fifty, and sit in my little room for the next fifty years, turning on the telescreen every morning to hear some loudmouthed liar tell me it's a beautiful day in Chicagee. Who knows, maybe by that time we'll have a hundred billion people enjoying peace and progress and prosperity. All sitting in little rooms and—''

''Watch out!'' Frazer grabbed the wheel. ''You nearly hit that truck.'' He waited until Harry's face relaxed before relinquishing his grip. ''Harry, you'd better go in for a checkup. It isn't just a headache with you, is it?''

''You're not fooling,'' Harry told him. ''It isn't just a headache.''

He began to think about what it really was, and that helped a little. It helped him get through the worst part, which was the downtown traffic and letting Frazer off and listening to Frazer urge him to see a doctor.

Then he got to the building parking area and let them take his car away and bury it down in the droning darkness where the horns hooted and the headlights glared.

Harry climbed the ramp and mingled with the ten-thirty shift on its way up to the elevators. Eighteen elevators in his building, to serve eighty floors. Nine of the elevators were express to the fiftieth floor, three were express to sixty-five. He wanted one of the latter, and so did the mob. The crushing, clinging mob. They pressed and panted the way mobs always do; mobs that lynch and torture and dance around bonfires and guillotines and try to drag you down to trample you to death because they can't stand you if your name is Harry and you want to be different.

They hate you because you don't like powdered eggs and the telescreen and a beautiful day in Chicagee. And they stare at you because your forehead hurts and the muscle in your jaw twitches and they know you want to scream as you go up, up, up, and try to think why you get a headache from jerking your head to the left.

Then Harry was at the office door and they said good morning when he came in, all eighty of the typists in the outer office working their electronic machines and offering him their electronic smiles, including the girl he had made electronic love to last Saturday night and who wanted him to move into a two-room marriage and have children, lots of children who could enjoy peace and progress and prosperity.

* * * * *

Harry snapped out of it, going down the corridor. Only a few steps more and he'd be safe in his office, his own private office, almost as big as his apartment. And there would be liquor, and the yellowjackets in the drawer. That would help. Then he could get to work.

What was today's assignment? He tried to remember. It was Wilmer-Klibby, wasn't it? Telescreenads for Wilmer-Klibby, makers of window-glass.

Window-glass.

He opened his office door and then slammed it shut behind him. For a minute everything blurred, and then he could remember.

Now he knew what caused him to jerk his head, what gave him the headaches when he did so. Of course. That was it.

When he sat down at the table for breakfast in the morning he turned his head to the left because he'd always done so, ever since he was a little boy. A little boy, in what was then Wheaton, sitting at the breakfast table and looking out of the window. Looking out at summer sunshine, spring rain, autumn haze, the white wonder of newfallen snow.

He'd never broken himself of the habit. He still looked to the left every morning, just as he had today. But there was no window any more. There was only a blank wall. And beyond it, the smog and the clamor and the crowds.

Window-glass. Wilmer-Klibby had problems. Nobody was buying window-glass any more. Nobody except the people who put up buildings like this. There were still windows on the top floors, just like the window here in his office.

Harry stepped over to it, moving very slowly because of his head. It hurt to keep his eyes open, but he wanted to stare out of the window. Up this high you could see above the smog. You could see the sun like a radiant jewel packed in the cotton cumulus of clouds. If you opened the window you could feel fresh air against your forehead, you could breathe it in and breathe out the headache.

But you didn't dare look down. Oh, no, never look down, because then you'd see the buildings all around you. The buildings below, black and sooty, their jagged outlines like the stumps of rotten teeth. And they stretched off in all directions, as far as the eye could attain; row after row of rotten teeth grinning up from the smog-choked throat of the streets. From the maw of the city far below came this faint but endless howling, this screaming of traffic and toil. And you couldn't help it, you breathed that in too, along with the fresh air, and it poisoned you and it did more than make your head ache. It made your heart ache and it made your soul sick, and it made you close your eyes and your lungs and your brain against it.

Harry reeled, but he knew this was the only way. Close your brain against it. And then, when you opened your eyes again, maybe you could see the way things used to be—

It was snowing out and it was a wet snow, the very best kind for snowballs and making a snowman, and the whole gang would come out after school.

But there was no school, this was Saturday, and the leaves were russet and gold and red so that it looked as if all the trees in the world were on fire. And you could scuff when you walked and pile up fallen leaves from the grass and roll in them.

And it was swell to roll down the front lawn in summer, just roll right down to the edge of the sidewalk like it was a big hill and let Daddy catch you at the bottom, laughing.

Mamma laughed too, and she said, Look, it's springtime, the lilacs are out, do you want to touch the pretty lilacs, Harry?

And Harry didn't quite understand what she was saying, but he reached out and they

were purple and smelled of rain and soft sweetness and they were just beyond the window, if he reached a little further he could touch them—

And then the snow and the leaves and the grass and the lilacs disappeared, and Harry could see the rotten teeth again, leering and looming and snapping at him. They were going to bite, they were going to chew, they were going to devour, and he couldn't stop them, couldn't stop himself. He was falling into the howling jaws of the city.

His last conscious effort was a desperate attempt to gulp fresh air into his lungs before he pinwheeled down. Fresh air was good for headaches....

2. Harry Collins—1998

It took them ten seconds to save Harry from falling, but it took him over ten weeks to regain his balance.

In fact, well over two months had passed before he could fully realize just what had happened, or where he was now. They must have noticed something was wrong with him that morning at the office, because two supervisors and an exec rushed in and caught him just as he was going out of the window. And then they had sent him away, sent him here.

"This is fine," he told Dr. Manschoff. "If I'd known how well they treated you, I'd have gone couch-happy years ago."

Dr. Manschoff's plump face was impassive, but the little laugh-lines deepened around the edges of his eyes. "Maybe that's why we take such care not to publicize our recent advances in mental therapy," he said. "Everybody would want to get into a treatment center, and then where would we be?"

Harry nodded, staring past the doctor's shoulder, staring out of the wide window at the broad expanse of rolling countryside beyond.

"I still don't understand, though," he murmured. "How can you possibly manage to maintain an institution like this, with all the space and the luxuries? The inmates seem to lead a better life than the adjusted individuals outside. It's topsy-turvy."

"Perhaps." Dr. Manschoff's fingers formed a pudgy steeple. "But then, so many things seem to be topsy-turvy nowadays, don't they? Wasn't it the realization of this fact which precipitated your own recent difficulties?"

"Almost precipitated me bodily out of that window," Harry admitted, cheerfully. "And that's another thing. I was sent here, I suppose, because I'd attempted suicide, gone into shock, temporary amnesia, something like that."

"Something like that," the doctor echoed, contemplating his steeple.

"But you didn't give me any treatment," Harry continued. "Oh, I was kept under sedation for a while, I realize that. And you and some of the other staff-members talked to me. But mainly I just rested in a nice big room and ate nice big meals."

"So?" The steeple's fleshy spire collapsed.

"So what I want to know is, when does the real treatment start? When do I go into analysis, or chemotherapy, and all that?"

Dr. Manschoff shrugged. "Do you think you need those things now?"

Harry gazed out at the sunlight beyond the window, half-squinting and half-frowning. "No, come to think of it, I don't believe I do. I feel better now than I have in years."

His companion leaned back. "Meaning that for years you felt all wrong. Because you were constricted, physically, psychically, and emotionally. You were cramped, squeezed in a vise until the pressure became intolerable. But now that pressure has been removed. As a result you no longer suffer, and there is no need to seek escape in death or denial of identity.

"This radical change of attitude has been brought about here in just a little more than two months' time. And yet you're asking me when the 'real treatment' begins."

"I guess I've already had the real treatment then, haven't I?"

"That is correct. Prolonged analysis or drastic therapy is unnecessary. We've merely given you what you seemed to need."

"I'm very grateful," Harry said. "But how can you afford to do it?"

Dr. Manschoff built another temple to an unknown god. He inspected the architecture critically now as he spoke. "Because your problem is a rarity," he said.

"Rarity? I'd have thought millions of people would be breaking down every month. The Naturalists say—"

The doctor nodded wearily. "I know what they say. But let's dismiss rumors and consider facts. Have you ever read any official report stating that the number of cases of mental illness ran into the millions?"

"No, I haven't."

"For that matter, do you happen to know of anyone who was ever sent to a treatment center such as this?"

"Well, of course, everybody goes in to see the medics for regular check-ups and this includes an interview with a psych. But if they're in bad shape he just puts them on extra tranquilizers. I guess sometimes he reviews their Vocational Apt tests and shifts them over into different jobs in other areas."

Dr. Manschoff bowed his head in reverence above the steeple, as if satisfied with the labors he had wrought. "That is roughly correct. And I believe, if you search your memory, you won't recall even a mention of a treatment center. This sort of place is virtually extinct, nowadays. There are still some institutions for those suffering from functional mental disorders—paresis, senile dementia, congenital abnormalities. But regular check-ups and preventative therapy take care of the great majority. We've ceased concentrating on the result of mental illnesses and learned to attack the causes.

"It's the old yellow fever problem all over again, you see. Once upon a time, physicians dealt exclusively with treatment of yellow fever patients. Then they shifted their attention to the source of the disease. They went after the mosquitoes, drained the swamps, and the yellow fever problem vanished.

"That's been our approach in recent years. We've developed social therapy, and so the need for individual therapy has diminished.

"What were the sources of the tensions producing mental disturbances? Physical

and financial insecurity, the threat of war, the aggressive patterns of a competitive society, the unresolved Oedipus-situation rooted in the old-style family relationship. These were the swamps where the mosquitoes buzzed and bit. Most of the swamps have been dredged, most of the insects exterminated.

"Today we're moving into a social situation where nobody goes hungry, nobody is jobless or unprovided for, nobody needs to struggle for status. Vocational Apt determines a man's rightful place and function in society, and there's no longer the artificial distinction imposed by race, color or creed. War is a thing of the past. Best of all, the old-fashioned 'home-life,' with all of its unhealthy emotional ties, is being replaced by sensible conditioning when a child reaches school age. The umbilical cord is no longer a permanent leash, a strangler's noose, or a silver-plated life-line stretching back to the womb."

Harry Collins nodded. "I suppose only the exceptional cases ever need to go to a treatment center like this."

"Exactly."

"But what makes me one of the exceptions? Is it because of the way the folks brought me up, in a small town, with all the old-fashioned books and everything? Is that why I hated confinement and conformity so much? Is it because of all the years I spent reading? And why—"

Dr. Manschoff stood up. "You tempt me," he said. "You tempt me strongly. As you can see, I dearly love a lecture—and a captive audience. But right now, the audience must not remain captive. I prescribe an immediate dose of freedom."

* * * * *

"You mean I'm to leave here?"

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Frankly, no. Not if it means going back to my job."

"That hasn't been decided upon. We can discuss the problem later, and perhaps we can go into the answers to those questions you just posed. But at the moment, I'd suggest you stay with us, though without the restraint of remaining in your room or in the wards. In other words, I want you to start going outside again."

"Outside?"

"You'll find several square miles of open country just beyond the doors here. You're at liberty to wander around and enjoy yourself. Plenty of fresh air and sunshine—come and go as you wish. I've already issued instructions which permit you to keep your own hours. Meals will be available when you desire them."

"You're very kind."

"Nonsense. I'm prescribing what you need. And when the time comes, we'll arrange to talk again. You know where to find me."

Dr. Manschoff dismantled his steeple and placed a half of the roof in each trouser-pocket.

And Harry Collins went outdoors.

It was wonderful just to be free and alone—like returning to that faraway childhood

in Wheaton once again. Harry appreciated every minute of it during the first week of his wandering.

But Harry wasn't a child any more, and after a week he began to wonder instead of wander.

The grounds around the treatment center were more than spacious; they seemed absolutely endless. No matter how far he walked during the course of a day, Harry had never encountered any walls, fences or artificial barriers; there was nothing to stay his progress but the natural barriers of high, steeply-slanting precipices which seemed to rim all sides of a vast valley. Apparently the center itself was set in the middle of a large canyon—a canyon big enough to contain an airstrip for helicopter landings. The single paved road leading from the main buildings terminated at the airstrip, and Harry saw helicopters arrive and depart from time to time; apparently they brought in food and supplies.

As for the center itself, it consisted of four large structures, two of which Harry was familiar with. The largest was made up of apartments for individual patients, and staffed by nurses and attendants. Harry's own room was here, on the second floor, and from the beginning he'd been allowed to roam around the communal halls below at will.

The second building was obviously administrative—Dr. Manschoff's private office was situated therein, and presumably the other staff-members operated out of here.

The other two buildings were apparently inaccessible; not guarded or policed or even distinguished by signs prohibiting access, but merely locked and unused. At least, Harry had found the doors locked when—out of normal curiosity—he had ventured to approach them. Nor had he ever seen anyone enter or leave the premises. Perhaps these structures were unnecessary under the present circumstances, and had been built for future accommodations.

Still, Harry couldn't help wondering.

And now, on this particular afternoon, he sat on the bank of the little river which ran through the valley, feeling the mid-summer sun beating down upon his forehead and staring down at the eddying current with its ripples and reflections.

Ripples and reflections....

Dr. Manschoff had answered his questions well, yet new questions had arisen.

Most people didn't go crazy any more, the doctor had explained, and so there were very few treatment centers such as this.

Question: Why were there any at all?

A place like this cost a fortune to staff and maintain. In an age where living-space and areable acreage was at such a premium, why waste this vast and fertile expanse? And in a society more and more openly committed to the policy of promoting the greatest good for the greatest number, why bother about the fate of an admittedly insignificant group of mentally disturbed patients?

Not that Harry resented his situation; in fact, it was almost too good to be true.

Question: Was it too good to be true?

Why, come to realize it, he'd seen less than a dozen other patients during his entire

stay here! All of them were male, and all of them—apparently—were recovering from a condition somewhat similar to his own. At least, he'd recognized the same reticence and diffidence when it came to exchanging more than a perfunctory greeting in an encounter in an outer corridor. At the time, he'd accepted their unwillingness to communicate; welcomed and understood it because of his condition. And that in itself wasn't what he questioned now.

But why were there so few patients beside himself? Why were they all males? And why weren't they roaming the countryside now the way he was?

So many staff-members and so few patients. So much room and luxury and freedom, and so little use of it. So little apparent purpose to it all.

Question: Was there a hidden purpose?

Harry stared down into the ripples and reflections, and the sun was suddenly intolerably hot, its glare on the water suddenly blinding and bewildering. He saw his face mirrored on the water's surface, and it was not the familiar countenance he knew—the features were bloated, distorted, shimmering and wavering.

Maybe it was starting all over again. Maybe he was getting another one of those headaches. Maybe he was going to lose control again.

* * * * *

Yes, and maybe he was just imagining things. Sitting here in all this heat wasn't a good idea.

Why not take a swim?

That seemed reasonable enough. In fact, it seemed like a delightful distraction. Harry rose and stripped. He entered the water awkwardly—one didn't dive, not after twenty years of abstinence from the outdoor life—but he found that he could swim, after a fashion. The water was cooling, soothing. A few minutes of immersion and Harry found himself forgetting his speculations. The uneasy feeling had vanished. Now, when he stared down into the water, he saw his own face reflected, looking just the way it should. And when he stared up—

He saw her standing there, on the bank.

She was tall, slim, and blonde. Very tall, very slim, and very blonde.

She was also very desirable.

Up until a moment ago, Harry had considered swimming a delightful distraction. But now—

"How's the water?" she called.

"Fine."

She nodded, smiling down at him.

"Aren't you coming in?" he asked.

"No."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you, Harry."

"You know my name?"

She nodded again. "Dr. Manschoff told me."

"You mean, he sent you here to find me?"

"That's right."

"But I don't understand. If you're not going swimming, then why—I mean—"

Her smile broadened. "It's just part of the therapy, Harry."

"Part of the therapy?"

"That's right. Part." She giggled. "Don't you think you'd like to come out of the water now and see what the rest of it might be?"

Harry thought so.

* * * * *

With mounting enthusiasm, he eagerly embraced his treatment and entered into a state of active cooperation.

It was some time before he ventured to comment on the situation. "Manschoff is a damned good diagnostician," he murmured. Then he sat up. "Are you a patient here?"

She shook her head. "Don't ask questions, Harry. Can't you be satisfied with things as they are?"

"You're just what the doctor ordered, all right." He gazed down at her. "But don't you even have a name?"

"You can call me Sue."

"Thank you."

He bent to kiss her but she avoided him and rose to her feet. "Got to go now."

"So soon?"

She nodded and moved towards the bushes above the bank.

"But when will I see you again?"

"Coming swimming tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I can get away for more occupational therapy then."

She stooped behind the bushes, and Harry saw a flash of white.

"You are a nurse, aren't you," he muttered. "On the staff, I suppose. I should have known."

"All right, so I am. What's that got to do with it?"

"And I suppose you were telling the truth when you said Manschoff sent you here. This is just part of my therapy, isn't it?"

She nodded briefly as she slipped into her uniform. "Does that bother you, Harry?"

He bit his lip. When he spoke, his voice was low. "Yes, damn it, it does. I mean, I got the idea—at least, I was hoping—that this wasn't just a matter of carrying out an assignment on your part."

She looked up at him gravely. "Who said anything about an assignment, darling?" she murmured. "I volunteered."

And then she was gone.

Then she was gone, and then she came back that night in Harry's dreams, and then she was at the river the next day and it was better than the dreams, better than the day before.

Sue told him she had been watching him for weeks now. And she had gone to Manschoff and suggested it, and she was very glad. And they had to meet here, out in the open, so as not to complicate the situation or disturb any of the other patients.

So Harry naturally asked her about the other patients, and the whole general setup, and she said Dr. Manschoff would answer all those questions in due time. But right now, with only an hour or so to spare, was he going to spend it all asking for information? Matters were accordingly adjusted to their mutual satisfaction, and it was on that basis that they continued their almost daily meetings for some time.

The next few months were perhaps the happiest Harry had ever known. The whole interval took on a dreamlike quality—idealized, romanticized, yet basically sensual. There is probably such a dream buried deep within the psyche of every man, Harry reflected, but to few is it ever given to realize its reality. His early questioning attitude gave way to a mood of mere acceptance and enjoyment. This was the primitive drama, the very essence of the male-female relationship; Adam and Eve in the Garden. Why waste time seeking the Tree of Knowledge?

And it wasn't until summer passed that Harry even thought about the Serpent.

One afternoon, as he sat waiting for Sue on the river bank, he heard a sudden movement in the brush behind him.

"Darling?" he called, eagerly.

"Please, you don't know me that well." The deep masculine voice carried overtones of amusement.

Flushing, Harry turned to confront the intruder. He was a short, stocky, middle-aged man whose bristling gray crewcut almost matched the neutral shades of his gray orderly's uniform.

"Expecting someone else, were you?" the man muttered. "Well, I'll get out of your way."

"That's not necessary. I was really just daydreaming, I guess. I don't know what made me think—" Harry felt his flush deepen, and he lowered his eyes and his voice as he tried to improvise some excuse.

"You're a lousy liar," the man said, stepping forward and seating himself on the bank next to Harry. "But it doesn't really matter. I don't think your girl friend is going to show up today, anyway."

"What do you mean? What do you know about—"

"I mean just what I said," the man told him. "And I know everything I need to know, about you and about her and about the situation in general. That's why I'm here, Collins."

He paused, watching the play of emotions in Harry's eyes.

"I know what you're thinking right now," the gray-haired man continued. "At first you wondered how I knew your name. Then you realized that if I was on the staff in the wards I'd naturally be able to identify the patients. Now it occurs to you that you've never

seen me in the wards, so you're speculating as to whether or not I'm working out of the administration offices with that psychiatric no good Manschoff. But if I were, I wouldn't be calling him names, would I? Which means you're really getting confused, aren't you, Collins? Good!''

* * * * *

The man chuckled, but there was neither mockery, malice, nor genuine mirth in the sound. And his eyes were sober, intent.

''Who are you?'' Harry asked. ''What are you doing here?''

''The name is Ritchie, Arnold Ritchie. At least, that's the name they know me by around here, and you can call me that. As to what I'm doing, it's a long story. Let's just say that right now I'm here to give you a little advanced therapy.''

''Then Manschoff did send you?''

The chuckle came again, and Ritchie shook his head. ''He did not. And if he even suspected I was here, there'd be hell to pay.''

''Then what do you want with me?''

''It isn't a question of what I want. It's a question of what you need. Which is, like I said, advanced therapy. The sort that dear old kindly permissive Father-Image Manschoff doesn't intend you to get.''

Harry stood up. ''What's this all about?''

Ritchie rose with him, smiling for the first time. ''I'm glad you asked that question, Collins. It's about time you did, you know. Everything has been so carefully planned to keep you from asking it. But you were beginning to wonder just a bit anyway, weren't you?''

''I don't see what you're driving at.''

''You don't see what anyone is driving at, Collins. You've been blinded by a spectacular display of kindness, misdirected by self-indulgence. I told you I knew everything I needed to know about you, and I do. Now I'm going to ask you to remember these things for yourself; the things you've avoided considering all this while.

''I'm going to ask you to remember that you're twenty-eight years old, and that for almost seven years you were an agency man and a good one. You worked hard, you did a conscientious job, you stayed in line, obeyed the rules, never rebelled. Am I correct in my summary of the situation?''

''Yes, I guess so.''

''So what was your reward for all this unceasing effort and eternal conformity? A one-room apartment and a one-week vacation, once a year. Count your blessings, Collins. Am I right?''

''Right.''

''Then what happened? Finally you flipped, didn't you? Tried to take a header out of the window. You chucked your job, chucked your responsibilities, chucked your future and attempted to chuck yourself away. Am I still right?''

''Yes.''

''Good enough. And now we come to the interesting part of the story. Seven years of

being a good little boy got you nothing but the promise of present and future frustration. Seven seconds of madness, of attempted self-destruction, brought you here. And as a reward for bucking the system, the system itself has provided you with a life of luxury and leisure—full permission to come and go as you please, live in spacious ease, indulge in the gratification of every appetite, free of responsibility or restraint. Is that true?''

''I suppose so.''

''All right. Now, let me ask you the question you asked me. What's it all about?''

Ritchie put his hand on Harry's shoulder. ''Tell me that, Collins. Why do you suppose you've received such treatment? As long as you stayed in line, nobody gave a damn for your comfort or welfare. Then, when you committed the cardinal sin of our present-day society—when you rebelled—everything was handed to you on a silver platter. Does that make sense?''

''But it's therapy. Dr. Manschoff said—''

''Look, Collins. Millions of people flip every year. Millions more attempt suicide. How many of them end up in a place like this?''

''They don't, though. That's just Naturalist propaganda. Dr. Manschoff said—''

''Dr. Manschoff said! I know what he said, all right. And you believed him, because you wanted to believe him. You wanted the reassurance he could offer you—the feeling of being unique and important. So you didn't ask him any questions, you didn't ask any questions of yourself. Such as why anybody would consider an insignificant little agency man, without friends, family or connections, worth the trouble of rehabilitating at all, let alone amidst such elaborate and expensive surroundings. Why, men like you are a dime a dozen these days—Vocational Apt can push a few buttons and come up with half a million replacements to take over your job. You aren't important to society, Collins. You aren't important to anyone at all, besides yourself. And yet you got the red-carpet treatment. It's about time somebody yanked that carpet out from under you. What's it all about?''

Harry blinked. ''Look here, I don't see why this is any of your business. Besides, to tell the truth, I'm expecting—''

''I know who you're expecting, but I've already told you she won't be here. Because she's expecting.''

''What—?''

''It's high time you learned the facts of life, Collins. Yes, the well-known facts of life—the ones about the birds and the bees, and barefoot boys and blondes, too. Your little friend Sue is going to have a souvenir.''

''I don't believe it! I'm going to ask Dr. Manschoff.''

''Sure you are. You'll ask Manschoff and he'll deny it. And so you'll tell him about me. You'll say you met somebody in the woods today—either a lunatic or a Naturalist spy who infiltrated here under false pretenses. And Manschoff will reassure you. He'll reassure you just long enough to get his hands on me. Then he'll take care of both of us.''

''Are you insinuating—''

''Hell, no! I'm telling you!'' Ritchie put his hand down suddenly, and his voice calmed.

"Ever wonder about those other two big buildings on the premises here, Collins? Well, I can tell you about one of them, because that's where I work. You might call it an experimental laboratory if you like. Sometime later on I'll describe it to you. But right now it's the other building that's important; the building with the big chimney. That's a kind of an incinerator, Collins—a place where the mistakes go up in smoke, at night, when there's nobody to see. A place where you and I will go up in smoke, if you're fool enough to tell Manschoff about this."

"You're lying."

"I wish to God I was, for both our sakes! But I can prove what I'm saying. You can prove it, for yourself."

"How?"

"Pretend this meeting never occurred. Pretend that you just spent the afternoon here, waiting for a girl who never showed up. Then do exactly what you would do under those circumstances. Go in to see Dr. Manschoff and ask him where Sue is, tell him you were worried because she'd promised to meet you and then didn't appear.

"I can tell you right now what he'll tell you. He'll say that Sue has been transferred to another treatment center, that she knew about it for several weeks but didn't want to upset you with the news of her departure. So she decided to just slip away. And Manschoff will tell you not to be unhappy. It just so happens that he knows of another nurse who has had her eye on you—a very pretty little brunette named Myrna. In fact, if you go down to the river tomorrow, you'll find her waiting for you there."

"What if I refuse?"

Ritchie shrugged. "Why should you refuse? It's all fun and games, isn't it? Up to now you haven't asked any questions about what was going on, and it would look very strange if you started at this late date. I strongly advise you to cooperate. If not, everything is likely to—quite literally—go up in smoke."

Harry Collins frowned. "All right, suppose I do what you say, and Manschoff gives me the answers you predict. This still doesn't prove that he'd be lying or that you're telling me the truth."

"Wouldn't it indicate as much, though?"

"Perhaps. But on the other hand, it could merely mean that you know Sue has been transferred, and that Dr. Manschoff intends to turn me over to a substitute. It doesn't necessarily imply anything sinister."

"In other words, you're insisting on a clincher, is that it?"

"Yes."

"All right." Ritchie sighed heavily. "You asked for it." He reached into the left-hand upper pocket of the gray uniform and brought out a small, stiff square of glossy paper.

"What's that?" Harry asked. He reached for the paper, but Ritchie drew his hand back.

"Look at it over my shoulder," he said. "I don't want any fingerprints. Hell of a risky business just smuggling it out of the files—no telling how well they check up on this material."

* * * * *

Harry circled behind the smaller man. He squinted down. "Hard to read."

"Sure. It's a photostat. I made it myself, this morning; that's my department. Read carefully now. You'll see it's a transcript of the lab report. Susan Pulver, that's her name, isn't it? After due examination and upon completion of preliminary tests, hereby found to be in the second month of pregnancy. Putative father, Harry Collins—that's you, see your name? And here's the rest of the record."

"Yes, let me see it. What's all this about inoculation series? And who is this Dr. Leffingwell?" Harry bent closer, but Ritchie closed his hand around the photostat and pocketed it again.

"Never mind that, now. I'll tell you later. The important thing is, do you believe me?"

"I believe Sue is pregnant, yes."

"That's enough. Enough for you to do what I've asked you to. Go to Manschoff and make inquiries. See what he tells you. Don't make a scene, and for God's sake don't mention my name. Just confirm my story for yourself. Then I'll give you further details."

"But when will I see you?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, if you like. Right here."

"You said he'd be sending another girl—"

Ritchie nodded. "So I did. And so he'll say. I suggest you beg to be excused for the moment. Tell him it will take a while for you to get over the shock of losing Sue this way."

"I won't be lying," Harry murmured.

"I know. And I'm sorry. Believe me, I am." Ritchie sighed again. "But you'll just have to trust me from now on."

"Trust you? When you haven't even explained what this is all about?"

"You've had your shock-therapy for today. Come back for another treatment tomorrow."

And then Ritchie was gone, the gray uniform melting away into the gray shadows of the shrubbery above the bank.

A short time later, Harry made his own way back to the center in the gathering twilight. The dusk was gray, too. Everything seemed gray now.

So was Harry Collins' face, when he emerged from his interview with Dr. Manschoff that evening. And it was still pallid the next afternoon when he came down to the river bank and waited for Ritchie to reappear.

The little man emerged from the bushes. He stared at Harry's drawn countenance and nodded slowly.

"I was right, eh?" he muttered.

"It looks that way. But I can't understand what's going on. If this isn't just a treatment center, if they're not really interested in my welfare, then what am I doing here?"

"You're taking part in an experiment. This, my friend, is a laboratory. And you are a nice, healthy guinea pig."

"But that doesn't make sense. I haven't been experimented on. They've let me do as

I please.''

''Exactly. And what do guinea pigs excel at? Breeding.''

''You mean this whole thing was rigged up just so that Sue and I would—?''

''Please, let's not be so egocentric, shall we? After all, you're not the only male patient in this place. There are a dozen others wandering around loose. Some of them have their favorite caves, others have discovered little bypaths, but all of them seem to have located ideal trysting-places. Whereupon, of course, the volunteer nurses have located them.''

''Are you telling me the same situation exists with each of the others?''

''Isn't it fairly obvious? You've shown no inclination to become friendly with the rest of the patients here, and none of them have made any overtures to you. That's because everyone has his own little secret, his own private arrangement. And so all of you go around fooling everybody else, and all of you are being fooled. I'll give credit to Manschoff and his staff on that point—he's certainly mastered the principles of practical psychology.''

''But you talked about breeding. With our present overpopulation problem, why in the world do they deliberately encourage the birth of more children?''

''Very well put. 'Why in the world' indeed! In order to answer that, you'd better take a good look at the world.''

Arnold Ritchie seated himself on the grass, pulled out a pipe, and then replaced it hastily. ''Better not smoke,'' he murmured. ''Be awkward if we attracted any attention and were found together.''

* * * * *

Harry stared at him. ''You are a Naturalist, aren't you?''

''I'm a reporter, by profession.''

''Which network?''

''No network. Newzines. There are still a few in print, you know.''

''I know. But I can't afford them.''

''There aren't many left who can, or who even feel the need of reading them. Nevertheless, mavericks like myself still cling to the ancient and honorable practices of the Fourth Estate. One of which is ferreting out the inside story, the news behind the news.''

''Then you're not working for the Naturalists.''

''Of course I am. I'm working for them and for everybody else who has an interest in learning the truth.'' Ritchie paused. ''By the way, you keep using that term as if it were some kind of dirty word. Just what does it mean? What is a Naturalist, in your book?''

''Why, a radical thinker, of course. An opponent of government policies, of progress. One who believes we're running out of living space, using up the last of our natural resources.''

''What do you suppose motivates Naturalists, really?''

''Well, they can't stand the pressures of daily living, or the prospects of a future when we'll be still more hemmed in.''

Ritchie nodded. "Any more than you could, a few months ago, when you tried to commit suicide. Wouldn't you say that you were thinking like a Naturalist then?"

Harry grimaced. "I suppose so."

"Don't feel ashamed. You saw the situation clearly, just as the so-called Naturalists do. And just as the government does. Only the government can't dare admit it—hence the secrecy behind this project."

"A hush-hush government plan to stimulate further breeding? I still don't see—"

"Look at the world," Ritchie repeated. "Look at it realistically. What's the situation at present? Population close to six billion, and rising fast. There was a leveling-off period in the Sixties, and then it started to climb again. No wars, no disease to cut it down. The development of synthetic foods, the use of algae and fungi, rules out famine as a limiting factor. Increased harnessing of atomic power has done away with widespread poverty, so there's no economic deterrent to propagation. Neither church nor state dares set up a legal prohibition. So here we are, at the millennium. In place of international tension we've substituted internal tension. In place of thermonuclear explosion, we have a population explosion."

"You make it look pretty grim."

"I'm just talking about today. What happens ten years from now, when we hit a population-level of ten billion? What happens when we reach twenty billion, fifty billion, a hundred? Don't talk to me about more substitutes, more synthetics, new ways of conserving top-soil. There just isn't going to be room for everyone!"

"Then what's the answer?"

"That's what the government wants to know. Believe me, they've done a lot of searching; most of it sub rosa. And then along came this man Leffingwell, with his solution. That's just what it is, of course—an endocrinological solution, for direct injection."

"Leffingwell? The Dr. Leffingwell whose name was on that photostat? What's he got to do with all this?"

"He's boss of this project," Ritchie said. "He's the one who persuaded them to set up a breeding-center. You're his guinea pig."

"But why all the secrecy?"

"That's what I wanted to know. That's why I scurried around, pulled strings to get a lab technician's job here. It wasn't easy, believe me. The whole deal is being kept strictly under wraps until Leffingwell's experiments prove out. They realized right away that it would be fatal to use volunteers for the experiments—they'd be bound to talk, there'd be leaks. And of course, they anticipated some awkward results at first, until the technique is refined and perfected. Well, they were right on that score. I've seen some of their failures." Ritchie shuddered. "Any volunteer—any military man, government employee or even a so-called dedicated scientist who broke away would spread enough rumors about what was going on to kill the entire project. That's why they decided to use mental patients for subjects. God knows, they had millions to choose from, but they were very particular. You're a rare specimen, Collins."

"How so?"

"Because you happen to fit all their specifications. You're young, in good physical condition. Unlike ninety percent of the population, you don't even wear contact lenses, do you? And your aberration was temporary, easily removed by removing you from the tension-sources which created it. You have no family ties, no close friends, to question your absence. That's why you were chosen—one of the two hundred."

"Two hundred? But there's only a dozen others here now."

"A dozen males, yes. You're forgetting the females. Must be about fifty or sixty in the other building."

"But if you're talking about someone like Sue, she's a nurse—"

Ritchie shook his head. "That's what she was told to say. Actually, she's a patient, too. They're all patients. Twelve men and sixty women, at the moment. Originally, about thirty men and a hundred and seventy women."

"What happened to the others?"

"I told you there were some failures. Many of the women died in childbirth. Some of them survived, but found out about the results—and the results, up until now, haven't been perfect. A few of the men found out, too. Well, they have only one method of dealing with failures here. They dispose of them. I told you about that chimney, didn't I?"

"You mean they killed the offspring, killed those who found out about them?"

Ritchie shrugged.

"But what are they actually doing? Who is this Dr. Leffingwell? What's it all about?"

"I think I can answer those questions for you."

Harry wheeled at the sound of the familiar voice.

Dr. Manschoff beamed down at him from the top of the river bank. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "I wasn't following you with any intent to eavesdrop. I was merely concerned about him." His eyes flickered as he directed his gaze past Harry's shoulder, and Harry turned again to look at Arnold Ritchie.

* * * * *

The little man was no longer standing and he was no longer alone. Two attendants now supported him, one on either side, and Ritchie himself sagged against their grip with eyes closed. A hypodermic needle in one attendant's hand indicated the reason for Ritchie's sudden collapse.

"Merely a heavy sedative," Dr. Manschoff murmured. "We came prepared, in expectation of just such an emergency." He nodded at his companions. "Better take him back now," he said. "I'll look in on him this evening, when he comes out of it."

"Sorry about all this," Manschoff continued, sitting down next to Harry as the orderlies lifted Ritchie's inert form and carried him up the slanting slope. "It's entirely my fault. I misjudged my patient—never should have permitted him such a degree of freedom. Obviously, he's not ready for it yet. I do hope he didn't upset you in any way."

"No. He seemed quite"—Harry hesitated, then went on hastily—"logical."

"Indeed he is." Dr. Manschoff smiled. "Paranoid delusions, as they used to call them, can often be rationalized most convincingly. And from what little I heard, he was doing an excellent job, wasn't he?"

"Well—"

"I know." A slight sigh erased the smile. "Leffingwell and I are mad scientists, conducting biological experiments on human guinea pigs. We've assembled patients for breeding purposes and the government is secretly subsidizing us. Also, we incinerate our victims—again, with full governmental permission. All very logical, isn't it?"

"I didn't mean that," Harry told him. "It's just that he said Sue was pregnant and he was hinting things."

"Said?" Manschoff stood up. "Hinted? I'm surprised he didn't go further than that. Just today, we discovered he'd been using the office facilities—he had a sort of probationary position, as you may have guessed, helping out the staff in administration—to provide tangible proof of his artistic creations. He was writing out 'official reports' and then photostating them. Apparently he intended to circulate the results as 'evidence' to support his delusions. Look, here's a sample."

Dr. Manschoff passed a square of glossy paper to Harry, who scanned it quickly. It was another laboratory report similar to the one Ritchie had shown him, but containing a different set of names.

"No telling how long this sort of thing has been going on," Manschoff said. "He may have made dozens. Naturally, the moment we discovered it, we realized prompt action was necessary. He'll need special attention."

"But what's wrong with him?"

"It's a long story. He was a reporter at one time—he may have told you that. The death of his wife precipitated a severe trauma and brought him to our attention. Actually, I'm not at liberty to say any more regarding his case; you understand, I'm sure."

"Then you're telling me that everything he had to say was a product of his imagination?"

"No, don't misunderstand. It would be more correct to state that he merely distorted reality. For example, there is a Dr. Leffingwell on the staff here; he is a diagnostician and has nothing to do with psychotherapy per se. And he has charge of the hospital ward in Unit Three, the third building you may have noticed behind Administration. That's where the nurses maintain residence, of course. Incidentally, when any nurses take on a—special assignment, as it were, such as yours, Leffingwell does examine and treat them. There's a new oral contraception technique he's evolved which may be quite efficacious. But I'd hardly call it an example of sinister experimentation under the circumstances, would you?"

Harry shook his head. "About Ritchie, though," he said. "What will happen to him?"

"I can't offer any prognosis. In view of my recent error in judgment concerning him, it's hard to say how he'll respond to further treatment. But rest assured that I'll do my best for his case. Chances are you'll be seeing him again before very long."

Dr. Manschoff glanced at his watch. "Shall we go back now?" he suggested. "Supper will be served soon."

The two men toiled up the bank.

Harry discovered that the doctor was right about supper. It was being served as he

returned to his room. But the predictions concerning Ritchie didn't work out quite as well.

It was after supper—indeed, quite some hours afterwards, while Harry sat at his window and stared sleeplessly out into the night—that he noted the thick, greasy spirals of black smoke rising suddenly from the chimney of the Third Unit building. And the sight may have prepared him for the failure of Dr. Manschoff's prophecy regarding his disturbed patient.

Harry never asked any questions, and no explanations were ever forthcoming.

But from that evening onward, nobody ever saw Arnold Ritchie again.

3. President Winthrop—1999

The Secretary of State closed the door.

"Well?" he asked.

President Winthrop looked up from the desk and blinked. "Hello, Art," he said. "Sit down."

"Sorry I'm late," the Secretary told him. "I came as soon as I got the call."

"It doesn't matter." The President lit a cigarette and pursed his lips around it until it stopped wobbling. "I've been checking the reports all night."

"You look tired."

"I am. I could sleep for a week. That is, I wish I could."

"Any luck?"

The President pushed the papers aside and drummed the desk for a moment. Then he offered the Secretary a gray ghost of a smile.

"The answer's still the same."

"But this was our last chance—"

"I know." The President leaned back. "When I think of the time and effort, the money that's been poured into these projects! To say nothing of the hopes we had. And now, it's all for nothing."

"You can't say that," the Secretary answered. "After all, we did reach the moon. We got to Mars." He paused. "No one can take that away from you. You sponsored the Martian flights. You fought for the appropriations, pushed the project, carried it through. You helped mankind realize its greatest dream—"

"Save that for the newscasts," the President said. "The fact remains, we've succeeded. And our success was a failure. Mankind's greatest dream, eh? Read these reports and you'll find out this is mankind's greatest nightmare."

"Is it that bad?"

"Yes." The President slumped in his chair. "It's that bad. We can reach the moon at will. Now we can send a manned flight to Mars. But it means nothing. We can't support life in either place. There's absolutely no possibility of establishing or maintaining an outpost, let alone a large colony or a permanent human residence. That's what all the

reports conclusively demonstrate.

"Every bit of oxygen, every bit of food and clothing and material, would have to be supplied. And investigations prove there's no chance of ever realizing any return. The cost of such an operation is staggeringly prohibitive. Even if there was evidence to show it might be possible to undertake some mining projects, it wouldn't begin to defray expenses, once you consider the transportation factor."

"But if they improve the rockets, manage to make room for a bigger payload, wouldn't it be cheaper?"

"It would still cost roughly a billion dollars to equip a flight and maintain a personnel of twenty men for a year," the President told him. "I've checked into that, and even this estimate is based on the most optimistic projection. So you can see there's no use in continuing now. We'll never solve our problems by attempting to colonize the moon or Mars."

"But it's the only possible solution left to us."

"No it isn't," the President said. "There's always our friend Leffingwell."

* * * * *

The Secretary of State turned away. "You can't officially sponsor a thing like that," he muttered. "It's political suicide."

The gray smile returned to the gray lips. "Suicide? What do you know about suicide, Art? I've been reading a few statistics on that, too. How many actual suicides do you think we had in this country last year?"

"A hundred thousand? Two hundred, maybe?"

"Two million." The President leaned forward. "Add to that, over a million murders and six million crimes of violence."

"I never knew—"

"Damned right you didn't! We used to have a Federal Bureau of Investigation to help prevent such things. Now the big job is merely to hush them up. We're doing everything in our power just to keep these matters quiet, or else there'd be utter panic. Then there's the accident total and the psycho rate. We can't build institutions fast enough to hold the mental cases, nor train doctors enough to care for them. Shifting them into other jobs in other areas doesn't cure, and it no longer even disguises what is happening. At this rate, another ten years will see half the nation going insane. And it's like this all over the world.

"This is race-suicide, Art. Race-suicide through sheer fecundity. Leffingwell is right. The reproductive instinct, unchecked, will overbalance group survival in the end. How long has it been since you were out on the streets?"

The Secretary of State shrugged. "You know I never go out on the streets," he said. "It isn't very safe."

"Of course not. But it's no safer for the hundreds of millions who have to go out every day. Accident, crime, the sheer maddening proximity of the crowds—these phenomena are increasing through mathematical progression. And they must be stopped. Leffingwell has the only answer."

"They won't buy it," warned the Secretary. "Congress won't, and the voters won't,

any more than they bought birth-control. And this is worse.''

''I know that, too.'' The President rose and walked over to the window, looking out at the sky-scraper apartments which loomed across what had once been the Mall. He was trying to find the dwarfed spire of Washington's Monument in the tangled maze of stone.

''If I go before the people and sponsor Leffingwell, I'm through. Through as President, through with the Party. They'll crucify me. But somebody in authority must push this project. That's the beginning. Once it's known, people will have to think about the possibilities. There'll be opposition, then controversy, then debate. And gradually Leffingwell will gain adherents. It may take five years, it may take ten. Finally, the change will come. First through volunteers. Then by law. I only pray that it happens soon.''

''They'll curse your name,'' the Secretary said. ''They'll try to kill you. It's going to be hell.''

''Hell for me if I do, yes. Worse hell for the whole world if I don't.''

''But are you quite sure it will work? His method, I mean?''

''You saw the reports on his tests, didn't you? It works, all right. We've got more than just abstract data, now. We've got films for the telescreenings all set up.''

''Films? You mean you'll actually show what the results are? Why, just telling the people will be bad enough. And admitting the government sponsored the project under wraps. But when they see, nothing on earth can save you from assassination.''

''Perhaps. It doesn't really matter.'' The President crushed his cigarette in the ash-tray. ''One less mouth to feed. And I'm getting pretty sick of synthetic meals, anyway.''

President Winthrop turned to the Secretary, his eyes brightening momentarily. ''Tell you what, Art. I'm not planning on breaking the proposal to the public until next Monday. What say we have a little private dinner party on Saturday evening, just the Cabinet members and their wives? Sort of a farewell celebration, in a way, but we won't call it that, of course? Chef tells me there's still twenty pounds of hamburger in the freezers.''

''Twenty pounds of hamburger? You mean it?'' The Secretary of State was smiling, too.

''That's right.'' The President of the United States grinned in anticipation. ''Been a long time since I've tasted a real, honest-to-goodness hamburger.''

4. Harry Collins—2000

Harry didn't ask any questions. He just kept his mouth shut and waited. Maybe Dr. Manschoff suspected and maybe he didn't. Anyway, there was no trouble. Harry figured there wouldn't be, as long as he stayed in line and went through the proper motions. It was all a matter of pretending to conform, pretending to agree, pretending to believe.

So he watched his step—except in the dreams, and then he was always falling into the yawning abyss.

He kept his nose clean—but in the dreams he smelled the blood and brimstone of the pit.

He managed to retain a cheerful smile at all times—though, in the dreams, he

screamed.

Eventually, he even met Myrna. She was the pretty little brunette whom Ritchie had mentioned, and she did her best to console him— only in dreams, when he embraced her, he was embracing a writhing coil of slimy smoke.

It may have been that Harry Collins went a little mad, just having to pretend that he was sane. But he learned the way, and he managed. He saved the madness (or was it the reality?) for the dreams.

Meanwhile he waited and said nothing.

He said nothing when, after three months or so, Myrna was suddenly "transferred" without warning.

He said nothing when, once a week or so, he went in to visit with Dr. Manschoff.

He said nothing when Manschoff volunteered the information that Ritchie had been "transferred" too, or suggested that it would be best to stay on for "further therapy."

And he said nothing when still a third nurse came his way; a woman who was callid, complaisant, and nauseatingly nymphomaniac.

The important thing was to stay alive. Stay alive and try to learn.

* * * * *

It took him almost an additional year to find out what he wanted to find out. More than eight months passed before he found a way of sneaking out of his room at night, and a way of getting into that Third Unit through a delivery door which was occasionally left open through negligence.

Even then, all he learned was that the female patients did have their living quarters here, along with the members of the staff and—presumably—Dr. Leffingwell. Many of the women were patients rather than nurses, as claimed, and a good number of them were in various stages of pregnancy, but this proved nothing.

Several times Harry debated the possibilities of taking some of the other men in his Unit into his confidence. Then he remembered what had happened to Arnold Ritchie and decided against this course. The risk was too great. He had to continue alone.

It wasn't until Harry managed to get into Unit Four that he got what he wanted (what he didn't want) and learned that reality and dreams were one and the same.

There was the night, more than a year after he'd come to the treatment center, when he finally broke into the basement and found the incinerators. And the incinerators led to the operating and delivery chambers, and the delivery chambers led to the laboratory and the laboratory led to the incubators and the incubators led to the nightmare.

In the nightmare Harry found himself looking down at the mistakes and the failures and he recognized them for what they were, and he knew then why the incinerators were kept busy and why the black smoke poured.

In the nightmare he saw the special units containing those which were not mistakes or failures, and in a way they were worse than the others. They were red and wriggling there beneath the glass, and on the glass surfaces hung the charts which gave the data. Then Harry saw the names, saw his own name repeated twice—once for Sue, once for Myrna. And he realized that he had contributed to the successful outcome or issue of the

experiments (outcome? Issue? These horrors?) and that was why Manschoff must have chosen to take the risk of keeping him alive. Because he was one of the good guinea pigs, and he had spawned, spawned living, mewing abominations.

He had dreamed of these things, and now he saw that they were real, so that nightmare merged with now, and he could gaze down at it with open eyes and scream at last with open mouth.

Then, of course, an attendant came running (although he seemed to be moving ever so slowly, because everything moves so slowly in a dream) and Harry saw him coming and lifted a bell-glass and smashed it down over the man's head (slowly, ever so slowly) and then he heard the others coming and he climbed out of the window and ran.

The searchlights winked across the courtyards and the sirens vomited hysteria from metallic throats and the night was filled with shadows that pursued.

But Harry knew where to run. He ran straight through the nightmare, through all the fantastic but familiar convolutions of sight and sound, and then he came to the river and plunged in.

Now the nightmare was not sight or sound, but merely sensation. Icy cold and distilled darkness; ripples that ran, then raced and roiled and roared. But there had to be a way out of the nightmare and there had to be a way out of the canyon, and that way was the river.

Apparently no one else had thought of the river; perhaps they had considered it as a possible avenue of escape and then discarded the notion when they realized how it ripped and raged among the rocks as it finally plunged from the canyon's mouth. Obviously, no one could hope to combat that current and survive.

But strange things happen in nightmares. And you fight the numbness and the blackness and you claw and convulse and you twist and turn and toss and then you ride the crests of frenzy and plunge into the troughs of panic and despair and you sweep round and round and sink down into nothingness until you break through to the freedom which comes only with oblivion.

Somewhere beyond the canyon's moiling maw, Harry Collins found that freedom and that oblivion. He escaped from the nightmare, just as he escaped from the river.

The river itself roared on without him.

And the nightmare continued, too....

5. Minnie Schultz—2009

When Frank came home, Minnie met him at the door. She didn't say a word, just handed him the envelope containing the notice.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked, trying to take her in his arms. "You been crying."

"Never mind." Minnie freed herself. "Just read what it says there."

Frank read slowly, determinedly, his features contorted in concentration. Vocational Apt had terminated his schooling at the old grade-school level, and while like all students he had been taught enough so that he could read the necessary advertising com-

mercials, any printed message of this sort provided a definite challenge.

Halfway through the notice he started to scowl. "What kind of monkey business is this?"

"No monkey business. It's the new law. Everybody that gets married in Angelisco takes the shots, from now on. Fella from State Hall, he told me when he delivered this."

"We'll see about this," Frank muttered. "No damn government's gonna tell me how to run my life. Sa free country, ain't so?"

Minnie's mouth began to twitch. "They're coming back tomorra morning, the fella said. To give me the first shots. Gee, honey, I'm scared, like. I don't want 'em."

"That settles it," Frank said. "We're getting out of this place, fast."

"Where'd we go?"

"Dunno. Someplace. Texas, maybe. I was listening to the 'casts at work today. They don't have this law in Texas. Not yet, anyway. Come on, start packing."

"Packing? But how'll we get there?"

"Fly. We'll jet right out."

"You got prior'ty reservations or something?"

"No." The scowl returned to Frank's forehead. "But maybe if I pitch 'em a sob story, tell 'em it's our honeymoon, you know, then we could—"

Minnie shook her head. "It won't work, honey. You know that. Takes six months to get a prior'ty clearance or whatever they call it. Besides, your job and all—what'll you do in Texas? They've got your number listed here. Why, we couldn't even land, like. I bet Texas is even more crowded than Angelisco these days, in the cities. And all the rest of it is Ag Culture project, isn't it?"

Frank was leaning against the sink, listening. Now he took three steps forward and sat down on the bed. He didn't look at her as he spoke.

"Well, we gotta do something," he said. "You don't want those shots and that's for sure. Maybe I can have one of those other things instead, those whaddya-call-'ems."

"You mean where they operate you, like?"

"That's right. A vas-something. You know, sterilize you. Then we won't have to worry."

Minnie took a deep breath. Then she sat down and put her arm around Frank.

"But you wanted kids," she murmured. "You told me, when we got married, you always wanted to have a son—"

Frank pulled away.

"Sure I do," he said. "A son. That's what I want. A real son. Not a freak. Not a damned little monster that has to go to the Clinic every month and take injections so it won't grow. And what happens to you if you take your shots now? What if they drive you crazy or something?"

Minnie put her arm around Frank again and made him look at her. "That's not true," she told him. "That's just a lot of Naturalist talk. I know."

"Hell you do."

"But I do, honey! Honest, like! May Stebbins, she took the shots last year, when they

asked for volunteers. And she's all right. You seen her baby yourself, remember? It's the sweetest little thing, and awful smart! So maybe it wouldn't be so bad.''

''I'll ask about being operated tomorrow,'' Frank said. ''Forget it. It don't matter.''

''Of course it matters.'' Minnie looked straight at him. ''Don't you think I know what you been going through? Sweating it out on that job day after day, going nuts in the traffic, saving up the ration coupons so's we'd have extra food for the honeymoon and all?

''You didn't have to marry me, you know that. It was just like we could have a place of our own together, and kids. Well, we're gonna have 'em, honey. I'll take the shots.''

Frank shook his head but said nothing.

''It won't be so bad,'' Minnie went on. ''The shots don't hurt at all, and they make it easier, carrying the baby. They say you don't even get morning sickness or anything. And just think, when we have a kid, we get a chance for a bigger place. We go right on the housing lists. We can have two rooms. A real bedroom, maybe.''

Frank stared at her. ''Is that all you can think about?'' he asked. ''A real bedroom?''

''But honey—''

''What about the kid?'' he muttered. ''How you suppose it's gonna feel? How'd you like to grow up and not grow up? How'd you like to be a midget three feet high in a world where everybody else is bigger? What kind of a life you call that? I want my son to have a decent chance.''

''He will have.''

Minnie stared back at him, but she wasn't seeing his face. ''Don't you understand, honey? This isn't just something happening to us. We're not special. It's happening to everybody, all over the country, all over the world. You seen it in the 'casts, haven't you? Most states, they adopted the laws. And in a couple more years it'll be the only way anyone will ever have kids. Ten, twenty years from now, the kids will be growing up. Ours won't be different then, because from now on all the kids will be just like he is. The same size.''

''I thought you was afraid of the shots,'' Frank said.

Minnie was still staring. ''I was, honey. Only, I dunno. I keep thinking about Grandma.''

''What's the old lady got to do with it?''

''Well, I remember when I was a little girl, like. How my Grandma always used to tell me about her Grandma, when she was a little girl.

''She was saying about how in the old days, before there even was an Angelisco—when her Grandma came out here in a covered wagon. Just think, honey, she was younger than I am, and she come thousands and thousands of miles in a wagon! With real horses, like! Wasn't any houses, no people or nothing. Except Indians that shot at them. And they climbed up the mountains and they crossed over the deserts and went hungry and thirsty and had fights with those Indians all the way. But they never stopped until they got here. Because they was the pioneers.''

''Pioneers?''

''That's what Grandma said her Grandma called herself. A pioneer. She was real

proud of it, too. Because it means having the courage to cut loose from all the old things and try something new when you need to. Start a whole new world, a whole new kind of life."

She sighed. "I always wanted to be a pioneer, like, but I never thought I'd get the chance."

"What are you talking about? What's all this got to do with us, or having a kid?"

"Don't you see? Taking these shots, having a baby this new way—it's sort of being a pioneer, too. Gonna help bring a new kind of people into a new kind of world. And if that's not being a pioneer, like, it's the closest I can come to it. It sounds right to me now."

Minnie smiled and nodded. "I guess I made up my mind just now. I'm taking the shots."

"Hell you are!" Frank told her. "We'll talk about it some more in the morning."

But Minnie continued to smile.

And that night, as she lay in the utility bed, the squeaking of the springs became the sound of turning wheels. The plastic walls and ceiling of the eightieth-floor apartment turned to billowing canvas, and the thunder of the passing jets transformed itself into the drumming hoofbeats of a million buffalo.

Let Frank talk to her again in the morning if he liked, Minnie thought. It wouldn't make any difference now. Because you can't stop us pioneers.

6. Harry Collins—2012

Harry crouched behind the boulders, propping the rifle up between the rocks, and adjusted the telescopic sights. The distant doorway sprang into sharp focus. Grunting with satisfaction, he settled down to his vigil. The rifle-barrel had been dulled down against detection by reflection, and Harry's dark glasses protected him against the glare of the morning sun. He might have to wait several hours now, but he didn't care. It had taken him twelve years to come this far, and he was willing to wait a little while longer.

Twelve years. Was it really that long?

A mirror might have answered him; a mirror might have shown him the harsh features of a man of forty-two. But Harry needed no mirror. He could remember the past dozen years only too easily—though they had not been easy years.

Surviving the river was only the beginning. Animal strength carried him through that ordeal. But he emerged from the river as an animal; a wounded animal, crawling through the brush and arroyo outside the southern Colorado canyon.

And it was animal cunning which preserved him. He'd wandered several days until he encountered Emil Grizek and his outfit. By that time he was half-starved and completely delirious. It took a month until he was up and around again.

But Emil and the boys had nursed him through. They took turns caring for him in the bunkhouse; their methods were crude but efficient and Harry was grateful. Best of all, they asked no questions. Harry's status was that of a hunted fugitive, without a Vocational Apt record or rating. The authorities or any prospective employers would inquire into

these things, but Emil Grizek never seemed curious. By the time Harry was up and around again, he'd been accepted as one of the bunch. He told them his name was Harry Sanders, and that was enough.

Two months after they found him, he'd signed on with Emil Grizek and found a new role in life.

Harry Collins, advertising copywriter, had become Harry Sanders, working cowhand.

There was surprisingly little difficulty. Grizek had absentee employers who weren't interested in their foreman's methods, just as long as he recruited his own wranglers for the Bar B Ranch. Nobody demanded to see Apt cards or insisted on making out formal work-reports, and the pay was in cash. Cowhands were hard to come by these days, and it was an unspoken premise that the men taking on such jobs would be vagrants, migratory workers, fugitives from justice and injustice. A generation or so ago they might have become tramps—but the last of the hoboes had vanished along with the last of the freight trains. Once the derelicts haunted the canyons of the big cities; today there was no place for them there, so they fled to the canyons of the west. Harry had found himself a new niche, and no questions asked.

Oddly enough, he fitted in. The outdoor life agreed with him, and in a matter of months he was a passable cowpoke; within a year he was one of Grizek's top hands.

He learned to ride a bucking jeep with the best of them, and he could spot, single out, and stun a steer in forty seconds flat; then use his electronic brander on it and have the critter back on its feet in just under a minute.

Work was no problem, and neither was recreation. The bunkhouse offered crude but adequate facilities for living; old-fashioned air-conditioning and an antique infra-red broiler seemed good enough for roughing it, and Cookie at least turned out real man-sized meals. Eating genuine beef and honest-to-goodness baked bread was a treat, and so was having the luxury of all that space in the sleeping quarters. Harry thrived on it.

And some of the other hands were interesting companions. True, they were renegades and mavericks, but they were each of them unique and individual, and Harry enjoyed listening to them fan the breeze during the long nights.

There was Big Phil, who was pushing sixty now. But you'd never know it, not unless you got him to talking about the old days when he'd been a boy in Detroit. His daddy had been one of the last of the Union Men, back in the days of what they used to call the Organized Labor Movement. He could tell you about wage-hour agreements and the Railroad Brotherhood and contract negotiations almost as if he knew of these things through personal experience. He even remembered the Democratic Party. Phil got out when the government took over and set up Vocational Apt and Industrial Supervision; that's when he drifted west.

Tom Lowery's family had been military; he claimed to have been a member of the last graduating class ever to leave West Point. When the armament race ended, his prospects of a career vanished, and he settled down as a guard at Canaveral. Finally, he'd headed for the open country.

Bassett was the scholar of the outfit. He could sit around and quote old-time book-

authors by the hour—classic writers like Prather and Spillane. In another age he might have been a college professor or even a football coach; he had an aptitude for the arts.

And there was Lobo, the misogynist, who had fled a wife and eleven children back in Monterey; and Januzki, who used to be mixed up with one of those odd religious cults out on the Coast. He bragged he'd been one of the Big Daddy-Os in the Beat Generationists, and he argued with Bassett about some old-time evangelist named Kerouac.

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Best of all, though, Harry liked talking to Nick Kendrick. Nick's hobby was music, and he treasured his second-hand stereophonic unit and collection of tapes. He too was a classicist in his way, and there was many a long winter night when Harry sat there listening to ancient folk songs. The quaint atonalities of progressive jazz and the childishly frantic rhythms of "cool sounds" were somehow soothing and reassuring in their reminder of a simple heritage from a simpler age.

But above all, these men were wranglers, and they took a peculiar pride in the traditions of their own calling. There wasn't a one of them who wouldn't spend hours mulling over the lore of the range and the prairie. They knew the Great Names from the Great Days—Eugene Autry, Wyatt Earp, the legendary Thomas Mix, Dale Robertson, Paladin, and all the others; men who rode actual horses in the era when the West was really an untamed frontier.

And like the cowboys they were, they maintained the customs of other days. Every few months they rode a bucking helicopter into some raw western town—Las Vegas, or Reno, or even over to Palm Springs—to drink recklessly in the cocktail lounges, gamble wildly at the slots, or "go down the line" with some telescreen model on location for outdoor ad-backgrounds. There were still half a dozen such sin-cities scattered throughout the west; even the government acknowledged the need of lonely men to blow off steam. And though Ag Culture officially disapproved of the whole cowhand system, and talked grimly of setting up new and more efficient methods for training personnel and handling the cattle ranges, nothing was ever done. Perhaps the authorities knew that it was a hopeless task; only the outcasts and iconoclasts had the temperament necessary to survive such loneliness under an open sky. City-dwelling conformists just could not endure the monotony.

But even Emil Grizek's hands marvelled at the way Harry lived. He never joined them in their disorderly descent upon the scarlet cities of the plain, and most of the time he didn't even seem to watch the telescreen. If anything, he deliberately avoided all possible contact with civilization.

Since he never volunteered any information about his own past, they privately concluded that he was just a psychopathic personality.

"Strong regressive and seclusive tendencies," Bassett explained, solemnly.

"Sure," Nick Kendrick nodded, wisely. "You mean a Mouldy Fig, like."

"Creeping Meatball," muttered cultist Januzki. Not being religious fanatics, the others didn't understand the reference. But gradually they came to accept Harry's isolationist ways as the norm—at least, for him. And since he never quarreled, never exhibited any signs of dissatisfaction, he was left to his own pattern.

Thus it was all the more surprising when that pattern was rudely and abruptly shattered.

Harry remembered the occasion well. It was the day the Leff Law was officially upheld by the Supremist Courts. The whole business came over the telescreens and there was no way of avoiding it—you couldn't avoid it, because everybody was talking about it and everybody was watching.

"Now what do you think?" Emil Grizek demanded. "Any woman wants a baby, she's got to have those shots. They say kids shrink down into nothing. Weigh less than two pounds when they're born, and never grow up to be any bigger than midgets. You ask me, the whole thing's plumb loco, to say nothing of psychotic."

"I dunno." This from Big Phil. "Reckon they just about have to do something, the way cities are filling up and all. Tell me every spot in the country, except for the plains states here, is busting at the seams. Same in Europe, Africa, South America. Running out of space, running out of food, all over the world. This man Leffingwell figures on cutting down on size so's to keep the whole shebang going."

"But why couldn't it be done on a voluntary basis?" Bassett demanded. "These arbitrary rulings are bound to result in frustrations. And can you imagine what will happen to the individual family constellations? Take a couple that already has two youngsters, as of now. Suppose the wife submits to the inoculations for her next child and it's born with a size-mutation. How in the world will that child survive as a midget in a family of giants? There'll be untold damage to the personality—"

"We've heard all those arguments," Tom Lowery cut in. "The Naturalists have been handing out that line for years. What happens to the new generation of kids, how do we know they won't be mentally defective, how can they adjust, by what right does the government interfere with private lives, personal religious beliefs; all that sort of thing. For over ten years now the debate's been going on. And meanwhile, time is running out. Space is running out. Food is running out. It isn't a question of individual choice any longer—it's a question of group survival. I say the Courts are right. We have to go according to law. And back the law up with force of arms if necessary."

"We get the message," Januzki agreed. "But something tells me there'll be trouble. Most folks need a midget like they need a monkey on their backs."

"It's a gasser, pardners," said Nick Kendrick. "Naturalists don't dig this. They'll fight it all along the line. Everybody's gonna be all shook up."

"It is still a good idea," Lobo insisted. "This Dr. Leffingwell, he has made the tests. For years he has given injections and no harm has come. The children are healthy, they survive. They learn in special schools—"

"How do you know?" Bassett demanded. "Maybe it's all a lot of motivationalist propaganda."

"We have seen them on the telescreens, no?"

"They could be faking the whole thing."

"But Leffingwell, he has offered the shots to other governments beside our own. The whole world will adopt them—"

"What if some countries don't? What if our kids become midgets and the Asiatics

refuse the inoculations?''

''They won't. They need room even more than we do.''

''No sense arguing,'' Emil Grizek concluded. ''It's the law. You know that. And if you don't like it, join the Naturalists.'' He chuckled. ''But better hurry. Something tells me there won't be any Naturalists around after a couple of years. Now that there's a Leff Law, the government isn't likely to stand for too much criticism.'' He turned to Harry. ''What do you think?'' he asked.

Harry shrugged. ''No comment,'' he said.

But the next day he went to Grizek and demanded his pay in full.

''Leaving?'' Grizek muttered. ''I don't understand. You've been with us almost five years. Where you going, what you intend to do? What's got into you all of a sudden?''

''Time for a change,'' Harry told him. ''I've been saving my money.''

''Don't I know it? Never touched a penny in all this time.'' Grizek ran a hand across his chin. ''Say, if it's a raise you're looking for, I can—''

''No, thanks. It's not that. I've money enough.''

''So you have. Around eighteen, twenty thousand, I reckon, what with the bonuses.'' Emil Grizek sighed. ''Well, if you insist, that's the way it's got to be, I suppose. When you plan on taking off?''

''Just as soon as there's a 'copter available.''

''Got one going up to Colorado Springs tomorrow morning for the mail. I can get you aboard, give you a check—''

''I'll want my money in cash.''

''Well, now, that isn't so easy. Have to send up for a special draft. Take a week or so.''

''I can wait.''

''All right. And think it over. Maybe you'll decide to change your mind.''

But Harry didn't change his mind. And ten days later he rode a 'copter into town, his money-belt strapped beneath his safety-belt.

From Colorado Springs he jetted to Kancity, and from Kancity to Memphisee. As long as he had money, nobody asked any questions. He holed up in cheap airtels and waited for developments.

It wasn't easy to accustom himself to urbanization again. He had been away from cities for over seven years now, and it might well have been seven centuries. The over-population problem was appalling. The outlawing of private automotive vehicles had helped, and the clearing of the airlanes served a purpose; the widespread increase in the use of atomic power cut the smog somewhat. But the synthetic food was frightful, the crowding intolerable, and the welter of rules and regulations attending the performance of even the simplest human activity past all his comprehension. Ration cards were in universal use for almost everything; fortunately for Harry, the black market accepted cash with no embarrassing inquiries. He found that he could survive.

But Harry's interest was not in survival; he was bent upon destruction. Surely the Naturalists would be organized and planning a way!

Back in '98, of course, they'd been merely an articulate minority without formal unity—

an abstract, amorphous group akin to the "Liberals" of previous generations. A Naturalist could be a Catholic priest, a Unitarian layman, an atheist factory hand, a government employee, a housewife with strong prejudices against governmental controls, a wealthy man who deplored the dangers of growing industrialization, an Ag Culture worker who dreaded the dwindling of individual rights, an educator who feared widespread employment of social psychology, or almost anyone who opposed the concept of Mass Man, Mass-Motivated. Naturalists had never formed a single class, a single political party.

Surely, however, the enactment of the Leffingwell Law would have united them! Harry knew there was strong opposition, not only on the higher levels but amongst the general population. People would be afraid of the inoculations; theologians would condemn the process; economic interests, real-estate owners and transportation magnates and manufacturers would sense the threat here. They'd sponsor and they'd subsidize their spokesmen and the Naturalists would evolve into an efficient body of opposition.

So Harry hoped, and so he thought, until he came out into the cities; came out into the cities and realized that the very magnitude of Mass Man mitigated against any attempt to organize him, except as a creature who labored and consumed. Organization springs from discussion, and discussion from thought—but who can think in chaos, discuss in delirium, organize in a vacuum? And the common citizen, Harry realized, had seemingly lost the capacity for group action. He remembered his own existence years ago—either he was lost in a crowd or he was alone, at home. Firm friendships were rare, and family units survived on the flimsiest of foundations. It took too much time and effort just to follow the rules, follow the traffic, follow the incessant routines governing even the simplest life-pattern in the teeming cities. For leisure there was the telescreen and the yellowjackets, and serious problems could be referred to the psych in routine check-ups. Everybody seemed lost in the crowd these days.

Harry discovered that Dr. Manschoff had indeed lied to him; mental disorders were on the increase. He remembered an old, old book—one of the very first treatises on sociological psychology. The Lonely Crowd, wasn't it? Full of mumbo-jumbo about "inner-directed" and "outer-directed" personalities. Well, there was a grain of truth in it all. The crowd, and its individual members, lived in loneliness. And since you didn't know very many people well enough to talk to, intimately, you talked to yourself. Since you couldn't get away from physical contact with others whenever you ventured abroad, you stayed inside—except when you had to go to work, had to line up for food-rations or supplies, had to wait for hours for your check-ups on off-days. And staying inside meant being confined to the equivalent of an old-fashioned prison cell. If you weren't married, you lived in "solitary"; if you were married, you suffered the presence of fellow-inmates whose habits became intolerable, in time. So you watched the screen more and more, or you increased your quota of sedation, and when that didn't help you looked for a real escape. It was always available to you if you searched long enough; waiting at the tip of a knife, in the coil of a rope, the muzzle of a gun. You could find it at the very bottom of a bottle of pills or at the very bottom of the courtyard outside your window. Harry recalled looking for it there himself, so many years ago.

But now he was looking for something else. He was looking for others who shared not only his viewpoint but his purposefulness.

Where were the Naturalists?

Harry searched for several years.

The press?

But there were no Naturalists visible on the telescreens. The news and the newsmakers reflected a national philosophy adopted many generations ago by the Founding Fathers of mass-communication in their infinite wisdom—"What's good for General Motors is good for the country." And according to them, everything happening was good for the country; that was the cardinal precept in the science of autobuyology. There were no Arnold Ritchies left any more, and the printed newzine seemed to have vanished.

The clergy?

Individual churches with congregations in physical attendance, seemed difficult to find. Telepreachers still appeared regularly every Sunday, but their scripts—like everyone else's—had been processed in advance. Denominationalism and sectarianism had waned, too; all of these performers seemed very much alike, in that they were vigorous, forthright, inspiring champions of the status quo.

The scientists?

But the scientists were a part of the government, and the government was a one-party system, and the system supported the nation and the nation supported the scientists. Of course, there were still private laboratories subsidized for industrial purposes, but the men who worked in them seemed singularly disinterested in social problems. In a way, Harry could understand their position. It isn't likely that a dedicated scientist, a man whose specialized research has won him a Nobel Prize for creating a new detergent, will be worldly enough to face unpleasant realities beyond the walls of his antiseptic sanctum. After all, there was precedent for such isolationism—did the sainted Betty Crocker ever enlist in any crusades? As for physicians, psychiatrists and mass-psychologists, they were the very ones who formed the hard core of Leffingwell's support.

The educators, then?

Vocational Apt was a part of the government. And the poor pedagogues, who had spent generations hacking their way out of the blackboard jungles, were only too happy to welcome the notion of a coming millennium when their small charges would be still smaller. Even though formal schooling, for most youngsters, terminated at fourteen, there was still the problem of overcrowding. Telescreening and teletesting techniques were a help, but the problem was essentially a physical one. And Leffingwell was providing a physical solution. Besides, the educators had been themselves educated, through Vocational Apt. And while they, and the government, fervently upheld the principle of freedom of speech, they had to draw the line somewhere. As everyone knows, freedom of speech does not mean freedom to criticize.

Business men?

Perhaps there were some disgruntled souls in the commercial community, whose secret heroes were the oil tycoons of a bygone era or the old-time Stock Exchange clan united under the totems of the bull or the bear. But the day of the rugged individualist was long departed; only the flabby individualist remained. And he had the forms to fill out and the inspectors to contend with, and the rationing to worry about and the taxes to

meet and the quotas to fulfill. But in the long run, he managed. The business man worked for the government, but the government also worked for him. His position was protected. And if the government said the Leff Shots would solve the overpopulation problem—without cutting down the number of consumers—well, was that really so bad? Why, in a generation or so there'd be even more customers! That meant increased property values, too.

It took Harry several years to realize he'd never find Naturalists organized for group action. The capacity for group action had vanished as the size of the group increased. All interests were interdependent; the old civic, fraternal, social and anti-social societies had no present purpose any more. And the once-familiar rallying-points—whether they represented idealistic humanitarianism or crass self-interest—had vanished in the crowd. Patriotism, racialism, unionism, had all been lost in a moiling megalopolitanism.

There were protests, of course. The mothers objected, some of them. Ag Culture, in particular, ran into difficulties with women who revived the quaint custom of "going on strike" against the Leff Law and refused to take their shots. But it was all on the individual level, and quickly coped with. Government medical authorities met the women at checkup time and demonstrated that the Leff Law had teeth in it. Teeth, and scalpels. The rebellious women were not subdued, slain, or segregated—they were merely sterilized. Perhaps more would have come of this if their men had backed them up; but the men, by and large, were realists. Having a kid was a headache these days. This new business of injections wasn't so bad, when you came right down to it. There'd still be youngsters around, and you'd get the same allotment for extra living space—only the way it worked out, there'd be more room and the kids would eat less. Pretty good deal. And it wasn't as if the young ones were harmed. Some of them seemed to be a lot smarter than ordinary—like on some of the big quizshows, youngsters of eight and nine were winning all those big prizes. Bright little ones. Of course, these must be the ones raised in the first special school the government had set up. They said old Leffingwell, the guy who invented the shots, was running it himself. Sort of experimenting to see how this new crop of kids would make out....

It was when Harry learned about the school that he knew what he must do.

And if nobody else would help him, he'd act on his own. There might not be any help from organized society, but he still had disorganized society to turn to.

* * * * *

He spent the next two years and the last of his money finding a way. The pattern of criminality had changed, too, and it was no easy matter to find the assistance he needed. About the only group crime still flourishing was hijacking; it took him a long while to locate a small under-cover outfit which operated around St. Louie and arrange to obtain a helicopter and pilot. Getting hold of the rifle was still more difficult, but he managed. And by the time everything was assembled, he'd found out what he needed to know about Dr. Leffingwell and his school.

As he'd suspected, the school was located in the old canyon, right in the same buildings which had once served as experimental units. How many youngsters were there, Harry didn't know. Maybe Manschoff was still on the staff, and maybe they'd brought in

a whole new staff. These things didn't matter. What mattered was that Leffingwell was on the premises. And a man who knew his way about, a man who worked alone and to a single purpose, could reach him.

Thus it was that Harry Collins crouched behind the boulder that bright May morning and waited for Dr. Leffingwell to appear. The helicopter had dropped him at the upper end of the canyon the day before, giving him a chance to reconnoitre and familiarize himself with the terrain once again. He'd located Leffingwell's quarters, even seen the man through one of the lower windows. Harry had no trouble recognizing him; the face was only too familiar from a thousand 'casts viewed on a thousand screens. Inevitably, some time today, he'd emerge from the building. And when he did, Harry would be waiting.

He shifted behind the rocks and stretched his legs. Twelve years had passed, and now he'd come full circle. The whole business had started here, and here it must end. That was simple justice.

And it is justice, Harry told himself. It's not revenge. Because there'd be no point to revenge; that was only melodramatic nonsense. He was no Monte Cristo, come to wreak vengeance on his cruel oppressors. And he was no madman, no victim of a monomaniacal obsession. What he was doing was the result of lengthy and logical consideration.

If Harry Collins, longtime fugitive from a government treatment center, tried to take his story to the people, he'd be silenced without a hearing. But his story must be heard. There was only one way to arrest the attention of a nation—with the report of a rifle.

A bullet in Leffingwell's brain; that was the solution of the problem. Overnight the assassin would become a national figure. They'd undoubtedly try him and undoubtedly condemn him, but first he'd have his day in court. He'd get a chance to speak out. He'd give all the voiceless, unorganized victims of the Leff Law a reason for rebellion—and offer them an example. If Leffingwell had to die, it would be in a good cause. Moreover, he deserved to die. Hadn't he killed men, women, infants, without mercy?

But it's not revenge, Harry repeated. And I know what I'm doing. Maybe I was disturbed before, but I'm sane now. Perfectly logical. Perfectly calm. Perfectly controlled.

Yes, and now his sane, logical, calm, controlled eyes noted that the distant door was opening, and he sighted through the 'scope and brought his sane, logical, calm, controlled hand up along the barrel to the trigger. He could see the two men emerging, and the shorter, plumper of the two was Leffingwell. He squinted at the high forehead with its receding hairline; it was a perfect target. A little squeeze now and he knew what would happen. In his sane, logical, calm, controlled mind he could visualize the way the black hole would appear in the center of that forehead, while behind it would be the torn and dripping redness flecked with gray—

"What are you doing?"

Harry whirled, staring; staring down at the infant who stood smiling beside him. It was an infant, that was obvious enough, and implicit in the diminutive stature, the delicate limbs and the oversized head. But infants do not wear the clothing of pre-adolescent boys, they do not enunciate with clarity, they do not stare coolly and knowingly at their elders. They do not say, "Why do you want to harm Dr. Leffingwell?"

Harry gazed into the wide eyes. He couldn't speak.

"You're sick, aren't you?" the child persisted. "Let me call the doctor. He can help you."

Harry swung the rifle around. "I'll give you just ten seconds to clear out of here before I shoot."

The child shook his head. Then he took a step forward. "You wouldn't hurt me," he said, gravely. "You're just sick. That's why you talk this way."

Harry leveled the rifle. "I'm not sick," he muttered. "I know what I'm doing. And I know all about you, too. You're one of them, aren't you? One of the first of Leffingwell's brood of illegitimates."

The child took another step forward. "I'm not illegitimate," he said. "I know who I am. I've seen the records. My name is Harry Collins."

Somewhere the rifle exploded, the bullet hurtling harmlessly overhead. But Harry didn't hear it. All he could hear, exploding in his own brain as he went down into darkness, was the sane, logical, calm, controlled voice of his son.

7. Michael Cavendish—2027

Mike was just coming through the clump of trees when the boy began to wave at him. He shifted the clumsy old Jeffrey .475, cursing the weight as he quickened his pace. But there was no help for it, he had to carry the gun himself. None of the boys were big enough.

He wondered what it had been like in the old days, when you could get fullsized bearers. There used to be game all over the place, too, and a white hunter was king.

And what was there left now? Nothing but pygmies, all of them, scurrying around and beating the brush for dibatags and gerenuks. When he was still a boy, Mike had seen the last of the big antelopes go; the last of the wildebeestes and zebra, too. Then the carnivores followed—the lions and the leopards. Simba was dead, and just as well. These natives would never dare to come out of the villages if they knew any lions were left. Most of them had gone to Cape and the other cities anyway; handling cattle was too much of a chore, except on a government farm. Those cows looked like moving mountains alongside the average boy.

Of course there were still some of the older generation left; Kikiyu and even a few Watusi. But the free inoculations had begun many years ago, and the life-cycle moved at an accelerated pace here. Natives grew old and died at thirty; they matured at fifteen. Now, with the shortage of game, the elders perished still more swiftly and only the young remained outside the cities and the farm projects.

Mike smiled as he waited for the boy to come up to him. He wasn't smiling at the boy—he was smiling at himself, for being here. He ought to be in Cape, too, or Kenyarobi. Damned silly, this business of being a white hunter, when there was nothing left to hunt.

But somehow he'd stayed on, since Dad died. There were a few compensations. At least here in the forests a man could still move about a bit, taste privacy and solitude and

the strange, exotic tropical fruit called loneliness. Even that was vanishing today.

It was compensation enough, perhaps, for lugging this damned Jeffrey. Mike tried to remember the last time he'd fired it at a living target. A year, two years? Yes, almost two. That gorilla up in Ruwenzori country. At least the boys swore it was ingagi. He hadn't hit it, anyway. Got away in the darkness. Probably he'd been shooting at a shadow. There were no more gorillas—maybe they had been taking the shots, too. Perhaps they'd all turned into rhesus monkeys.

Mike watched the boy run towards him. It was a good five hundred yards from the river bank, and the short brown legs couldn't move very swiftly. He wondered what it felt like to be small. One's sense of proportion must be different. And that, in turn, would affect one's sense of values. What values applied to the world about you when you were only three feet high?

Mike wouldn't know. He was a big man—almost five feet seven.

Sometimes Mike reflected on what things might be like if he'd been born, say, twenty years later. By that time almost everyone would be a product of Leff shots, and he'd be no exception. He might stay with people his own age in Kenyarobi without feeling self-conscious, clumsy, conspicuous. Pressed, he had to admit that was part of the reason he preferred to remain out here at Dad's old place now. He could tolerate the stares of the natives, but whenever he ventured into a city he felt awkward under the scrutiny of the young people. The way those teen-agers looked up at him made him feel a monster, rather.

Better to endure the monotony, the emptiness out here. Yes, and wait for a chance to hunt. Even though, nine times out of ten, it turned out to be a wild goose-chase. During the past year or so Mike had hunted nothing but legends and rumors, spent his time stalking shadows.

Then the villagers had come to him, three days ago, with their wild story. Even when he heard it, he realized it must be pure fable. And the more they insisted, the more they protested, the more he realized it simply couldn't be.

Still, he'd come. Anything to experience some action, anything to create the illusion of purpose, of—

"Tembo!" shrieked the boy, excited beyond all pretense of caution. "Up ahead, in river. You come quick, you see!"

No. It couldn't be. The government surveys were thorough. The last record of a specimen dated back over a half-dozen years ago. It was impossible that any survivors remained. And all during the safari these past days, not a sign or a print or a spoor.

"Tembo!" shrilled the boy. "Come quick!"

Mike cradled the gun and started forward. The other bearers shuffled behind him, unable to keep pace because of their short legs and—he suspected—unwilling to do so for fear of what might lie ahead.

Halfway towards the river bank, Mike halted. Now he could hear the rumbling, the unmistakable rumbling. And now he could smell the rank mustiness borne on the hot breeze. Well, at least he was down-wind.

The boy behind him trembled, eyes wide. He had seen something, all right. Maybe

just a crocodile, though. Still some crocs around. And he doubted if a young native would know the difference.

Nevertheless, Mike felt a sudden surge of unfamiliar excitement, half expectancy and half fear. Something wallowed in the river; something that rumbled and exuded the stench of life.

Now they were approaching the trees bordering the bank. Mike checked his gun carefully. Then he advanced until his body was aligned with the trees. From here he could see and not be seen. He could peer down at the river—or the place where the river had been, during the rainy season long past. Now it was nothing but a mudwallow under the glaring sun; a huge mudwallow, pitted with deep, circular indentations and dotted with dung.

But in the middle of it stood tembo.

Tembo was a mountain, tembo was a black block of breathing basalt. Tembo roared and snorted and rolled red eyes.

Mike gasped.

He was a white hunter, but he'd never seen a bull elephant before. And this one stood eleven feet at the shoulders if it stood an inch; the biggest creature walking the face of the earth.

It had risen from the mud, abandoned its wallowing as its trunk curled about, sensitive to the unfamiliar scent of man. Its ears rose like the outspread wings of some gigantic jungle bat. Mike could see the flies buzzing around the ragged edges. He stared at the great tusks that were veined and yellowed and broken—once men had hunted elephants for ivory, he remembered.

But how could they? Even with guns, how had they dared to confront a moving mountain? Mike tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. The stock slipped through his clammy hands.

"Shoot!" implored the boy beside him. "You shoot, now!"

Mike gazed down. The elephant was aware of him. It turned deliberately, staring up the bank as it swayed on the four black pillars of its legs. Mike could see its eyes, set in a mass of grayish wrinkles. The eyes had recognized him.

They knew, he realized. The eyes knew all about him; who he was and what he was and what he had come here to do. The eyes had seen man before—perhaps long before Mike was born. They understood everything; the gun and the presence and the purpose.

"Shoot!" the boy cried, not bothering to hold his voice down any longer. For the elephant was moving slowly towards the side of the wallow, moving deliberately to firmer footing, and the boy was afraid. Mike was afraid, too, but he couldn't shoot.

"No," he murmured. "Let him go. I can't kill him."

"You must," the boy said. "You promise. Look—all the meat. Meat for two, three villages."

Mike shook his head. "I can't do it," he said. "That isn't meat. That's life. Bigger life than we are. Don't you understand? Oh, the bloody hell with it! Come on."

The boy wasn't listening to him. He was watching the elephant. And now he started to tremble.

For the elephant was moving up onto solid ground. It moved slowly, daintily, almost mincing as its legs sampled the surface of the shore. Then it looked up and this time there was no doubt as to the direction of its gaze—it stared intently at Mike and the boy on the bank. Its ears fanned, then flared. Suddenly the elephant raised its trunk and trumpeted fiercely.

And then, lowering the black battering-ram of its head, the beast came forward. A deceptively slow lope, a scarcely accelerated trot, and then all at once it was moving swiftly, swiftly and surely and inexorably towards them. The angle of the bank was not steep and the elephant's speed never slackened on the slope. Its right shoulder struck a sapling and the sapling splintered. It was crashing forward in full charge. Again it trumpeted, trunk extended like a flail of doom.

"Shoot!" screamed the boy.

Mike didn't want to shoot. He wanted to run. He wanted to flee the mountain, flee the incredible breathing bulk of this grotesque giant. But he was a white hunter, he was a man, and a man is not a beast; a man does not run away from life in any shape or size.

The trunk came up. Mike raised the gun. He heard the monster roar, far away, and then he heard another sound that must be the gun's discharge, and something hit him in the shoulder and knocked him down. Recoil? Yes, because the elephant wasn't there any more; he could hear the crashing and thrashing down below, over the rim of the river bank.

Mike stood up. He saw the boy running now, running back to the bearers huddled along the edge of the trail.

He rubbed his shoulder, picked up his gun, reloaded. The sounds from below had ceased. Slowly, Mike advanced to the lip of the bank and stared down.

The bull elephant had fallen and rolled into the wallow once more. It had taken a direct hit, just beneath the right ear, and even as Mike watched, its trunk writhed feebly like a dying serpent, then fell forward into the mud. The gigantic ears twitched, then flickered and flopped, and the huge body rolled and settled.

Suddenly Mike began to cry.

Damn it, he hadn't wanted to shoot. If the elephant hadn't charged like that—

But the elephant had to charge. Just as he had to shoot. That was the whole secret. The secret of life. And the secret of death, too.

Mike turned away, facing the east. Kenyarobi was east, and he'd be going there now. Nothing to hold him here in the forests any longer. He wouldn't even wait for the big feast. To hell with elephant-meat, anyway. His hunting days were over.

Mike walked slowly up the trail to the waiting boys.

And behind him, in the wallow, the flies settled down on the lifeless carcass of the last elephant in the world.

8. Harry Collins—2029

The guards at Stark Falls were under strict orders not to talk. Each prisoner here was exercised alone in a courtyard runway, and meals were served in the cells. The cells were comfortable enough, and while there were no telescreens, books were available—genuine, old-style books which must have been preserved from libraries dismantled fifty years ago or more. Harry Collins found no titles dated later than 1975. Every day or so an attendant wheeled around a cart piled high with the dusty volumes. Harry read to pass the time.

At first he kept anticipating his trial, but after a while he almost forgot about that possibility. And it was well over a year before he got a chance to tell his story to anyone.

When his opportunity came, his audience did not consist of judge or jury, doctor, lawyer or penologist. He spoke only to Richard Wade, a fellow-prisoner who had been thrust into the adjoining cell on the evening of October 11th, 2013.

Harry spoke haltingly at first, but as he progressed the words came more easily, and emotion lent its own eloquence. His unseen auditor on the other side of the wall did not interrupt or question him; it was enough, for Harry, that there was someone to listen at last.

"So it wasn't a bit like I'd expected," he concluded. "No trial, no publicity. I've never seen Leffingwell again, nor Manschoff. Nobody questioned me. By the time I recovered consciousness, I was here in prison. Buried alive."

Richard Wade spoke slowly, for the first time. "You're lucky. They might have shot you down on the spot."

"That's just what bothers me," Harry told him. "Why didn't they kill me? Why lock me up incommunicado this way? There aren't many prisons left these days, with food and space at such a premium."

"There are no prisons left at all—officially," Wade said. "Just as there are no longer any cemeteries. But important people are still given private burials and their remains secretly preserved. All a matter of influence."

"I've no influence. I'm not important. Wouldn't you think they'd consider it risky to keep me alive, under the circumstances? If there'd ever be an investigation—"

"Who would investigate? Not the government, surely."

"But suppose there's a political turnover. Suppose Congress want to make capital of the situation?"

"There is no Congress."

Harry gasped. "No Congress?"

"As of last month. It was dissolved. Henceforth we are governed by the Cabinet, with authority delegated to department heads."

"But that's preposterous! Nobody'd stand still for something like that!"

"They did stand still, most of them. After a year of careful preparation—of wholesale exposes of Congressional graft and corruption and inefficiency. Turned out that Congress was the villain all along; the Senators and Representatives had finagled tariff-bar-

riers and restrictive trade-agreements which kept our food supply down. They were opposing international federation. In plain language, people were sold a bill of goods—get rid of Congress and you'll have more food. That did it."

"But you'd think the politicians themselves would realize they were cutting their own throats! The state legislatures and the governors—"

"Legislatures were dissolved by the same agreement," Wade went on. "There are no states any more; just governmental districts. Based upon sensible considerations of area and population. This isn't the old-time expanding economy based on obsolescence and conspicuous consumption. The primary problem at the moment is sheer survival. In a way, the move makes sense. Old-fashioned political machinery couldn't cope with the situation; there's no time for debate when instantaneous decisions are necessary to national welfare. You've heard how civil liberties were suspended during the old wars. Well, there's a war on right now; a war against hunger, a war against the forces of fecundity. In another dozen years or so, when the Leff shot generation is fullgrown and a lot of the elderly have died off, the tensions will ease. Meanwhile, quick action is necessary. Arbitrary action."

"But you're defending dictatorship!"

Richard Wade made a sound which is usually accompanied by a derisive shrug. "Am I? Well, I didn't when I was outside. And that's why I'm here now."

Harry Collins cleared his throat. "What did you do?"

"If you refer to my profession, I was a scripter. If you refer to my alleged criminal activity, I made the error of thinking the way you do, and the worse error of attempting to inject such attitudes in my scripts. Seems that when Congress was formally dissolved, there was some notion of preparing a timely show—a sort of historical review of the body, using old film clips. What my superiors had in mind was a comedy of errors; a cavalcade of mistakes and misdeeds showing just why we were better off without supporting a political sideshow. Well, I carried out the assignment and edited the films, but when I drafted a rough commentary, I made the mistake of taking both a pro and con slant. Nothing like that ever reached the telescreens, of course, but what I did was promptly noted. They came for me at once and hustled me off here. I didn't get a hearing or a trial, either."

"But why didn't they execute you? Or—" Harry hesitated—"is that what you expect?"

"Why didn't they execute you?" Wade shot back. He was silent for a moment before continuing. "No, I don't expect anything like that, now. They'd have done it on the spot if they intended to do so at all. No, I've got another idea about people like you and myself. And about some of the Congressmen and Senators who dropped out of sight, too. I think we're being stockpiled."

"Stockpiled?"

"It's all part of a plan. Give me a little time to think. We can talk again, later." Wade chuckled once more. "Looks as if there'll be ample opportunity in the future."

And there was. In the months ahead, Harry spoke frequently with his friend behind the wall. He never saw him—prisoners at Stark Falls were exercised separately, and there was no group assembly or recreation. Surprisingly adequate meals were served

in surprisingly comfortable cells. In the matter of necessities, Harry had no complaints. And now that he had someone to talk to, the time seemed to go more swiftly.

He learned a great deal about Richard Wade during the next few years. Mostly, Wade liked to reminisce about the old days. He talked about working for the networks—the commercial networks, privately owned, which flourished before the government took over communications media in the '80s.

"That's where you got your start, eh?" Harry asked.

"Lord, no, boy! I'm a lot more ancient than you think. Why, I'm pushing sixty-five. Born in 1940. That's right, during World War II. I can almost remember the atomic bomb, and I sure as hell remember the sputniks. It was a crazy period, let me tell you. The pessimists worried about the Russians blowing us up, and the optimists were sure we had a glorious future in the conquest of space. Ever hear that old fable about the blind men examining an elephant? Well, that's the way most people were; each of them groping around and trying to determine the exact shape of things to come. A few of us even made a little money from it for a while, writing science fiction. That's how I got my start."

"You were a writer?"

"Sold my first story when I was eighteen or so. Kept on writing off and on for almost twenty years. Of course, Robertson's thermo-nuc formula came along in '75, and after that everything went to pot. It knocked out the chances of future war, but it also knocked out the interest in speculation or escape-fiction. So I moved over into television for a while, and stayed with it. But the old science fiction was fun while it lasted. Ever read any of it?"

"No," Harry admitted. "That was all before my time. Tell me, though—did any of it make sense? I mean, did some of those writers foresee what was really going to happen?"

"There were plenty of penny prophets and nickel Nostradamuses," Wade told him. "But as I said, most of them were assuming war with the Communists or a new era of space travel. Since Communism collapsed and space flight was just an expensive journey to a dead end and dead worlds, it follows that the majority of fictional futures were founded on fallacies. And all the rest of the extrapolations dealt with superficial social manifestations.

"For example, they wrote about civilizations dominated by advertising and mass-motivation techniques. It's true that during my childhood this seemed to be a logical trend—but once demand exceeded supply, the whole mechanism of stimulating demand, which was advertising's chief function, bogged down. And mass-motivation techniques, today, are dedicated almost entirely to maintaining minimum resistance to a system insuring our survival.

"Another popular idea was based on the notion of an expanding matriarchy—a gerontomatriarchy, rather, in which older women would take control. In an age when women outlived men by a number of years, this seemed possible. Now, of course, shortened working hours and medical advances have equalized the life-span. And since private property has become less and less of a factor in dominating our collective destinies, it hardly matters whether the male or the female has the upper hand.

"Then there was the common theory that technological advances would result in a push-button society, where automatons would do all the work. And so they might—if we had an unlimited supply of raw materials to produce robots, and unlimited power-sources to activate them. As we now realize, atomic power cannot be utilized on a minute scale.

"Last, but not least, there was the concept of a medically-orientated system, with particular emphasis on psychotherapy, neurosurgery, and parapsychology. The world was going to be run by telepaths, psychosis eliminated by brainwashing, intellect developed by hypnotic suggestion. It sounded great—but the conquest of physical disease has occupied the medical profession almost exclusively.

"No, what they all seemed to overlook, with only a few exceptions, was the population problem. You can't run a world through advertising when there are so many people that there aren't enough goods to go around anyway. You can't turn it over to big business when big government has virtually absorbed all of the commercial and industrial functions, just to cope with an ever-growing demand. A matriarchy loses its meaning when the individual family unit changes character, under the stress of an increasing population-pressure which eliminates the old-fashioned home, family circle, and social pattern. And the more we must conserve dwindling natural resources for people, the less we can expend on experimentation with robots and machinery. As for the psychologist-dominated society, there are just too many patients and not enough physicians. I don't have to remind you that the military caste lost its chance of control when war disappeared, and that religion is losing ground every day. Class-lines are vanishing, and racial distinctions will be going next. The old idea of a World Federation is becoming more and more practical. Once the political barriers are down, miscegenation will finish the job. But nobody seemed to foresee this particular future. They all made the mistake of worrying about the hydrogen-bomb instead of the sperm-bomb."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, although Wade couldn't see his response. "But isn't it true that there's a little bit of each of these concepts in our actual situation today?" he asked. "I mean, government and business are virtually one and the same, and they do use propaganda techniques to control all media. As for scientific research, look at how we've rebuilt our cities and developed synthetics for food and fuel and clothing and shelter. When it comes to medicine, there's Leffingwell and his inoculations. Isn't that all along the lines of your early science fiction?"

"Where's your Underground?" Richard Wade demanded.

"My what?"

"Your Underground," Wade repeated. "Hell, every science fiction yarn about a future society had its Underground! That was the whole gimmick in the plot. The hero was a conformist who tangled with the social order—come to think of it, that's what you did, years ago. Only instead of becoming an impotent victim of the system, he'd meet up with the Underground Movement. Not some sourball like your friend Ritchie, who tried to operate on his own hook, without real plans or system, but a complete sub rosa organization, bent on starting a revolution and taking over. There'd be wise old priests and wise old crooks and wise old officers and wise old officials, all playing a double game and planning a coup. Spies all over the place, get me? And in no time at all, our hero would be playing tag with the top figures in the government. That's how it worked out in

all the stories.

"But what happens in real life? What happened to you, for example? You fell for a series of stupid tricks, stupidly perpetrated—because the people in power are people, and not the kind of synthetic super-intellects dreamed up by frustrated fiction-fabricators. You found out that the logical candidates to constitute an Underground were the Naturalists; again, they were just ordinary individuals with no genius for organization. As for coming in contact with key figures, you were actually on hand when Leffingwell completed his experiments. And you came back, years later, to hunt him down. Very much in the heroic tradition, I admit. But you never saw the man except through the telescopic sights of your rifle. That was the end of it. No modern-day Machiavelli has hauled you in to play cat-and-mouse games with you, and no futuristic Freud has bothered to wash your brain or soft-soap your subconscious. You just aren't that important, Collins."

"But they put me in a special prison. Why?"

"Who knows? They put me here, too."

"You said something once, about stockpiling us. What did you mean?"

"Well, it was just an old science fiction idea, I suppose. I'll tell you about it tomorrow, eh?"

And so the matter—and Harry Collins—rested for the night.

The next day Richard Wade was gone.

Harry called to him and there was no answer. And he cried out and he cursed and he paced his cell and he walked alone in the courtyard and he begged the impassive guards for information, and he sweated and he talked to himself and he counted the days and he lost count of the days.

Then, all at once, there was another prisoner in the adjacent cell, and his name was William Chang, and he was a biologist. He was reticent about the crime he had committed, but quite voluble about the crimes committed by others in the world outside. Much of what he said, about genes and chromosomes and recessive characteristics and mutation, seemed incomprehensible to Harry. But in their talks, one thing emerged clearly enough—Chang was concerned for the future of the race. "Leffingwell should have waited," he said. "It's the second generation that will be important. As I tried to tell my people—"

"Is that why you're here?"

Chang sighed. "I suppose so. They wouldn't listen, of course. Overpopulation has always been the curse of Asia, and this seemed to be such an obvious solution. But who knows? The time may come when they need men like myself."

"So you were stockpiled too."

"What's that?"

Harry told him about Richard Wade's remarks, and together they tried to puzzle out the theory behind them.

But not for long. Because once again Harry Collins awoke in the morning to find the adjoining cell empty, and once again he was alone for a long time.

At last a new neighbor came. His name was Lars Neilstrom. Neilstrom talked to him of ships and shoes and sealing-wax and the thousand and one things men will discuss in their loneliness and frustration, including—inevitably—their reasons for being here.

Neilstrom had been an instructor under Vocational Apt, and he was at a loss to explain his presence at Stark Falls. When Harry spoke of the stockpiling theory, his fellow-prisoner demurred. "It's more like Kafka than science fiction," he said. "But then, I don't suppose you've ever read any Kafka."

"Yes, I have," Harry told him. "Since I came here I've done nothing but read old books. Lately they've been giving me microscans. I've been studying up on biology and genetics; talking to Chang got me interested. In fact, I'm really going in for self-education. There's nothing else to do."

"Self-education! That's the only method left nowadays." Neilstrom sounded bitter. "I don't know what's going to become of our heritage of knowledge in the future. I'm not speaking of technological skill; so-called scientific information is carefully preserved. But the humanities are virtually lost. The concept of the well-rounded individual is forgotten. And when I think of the crisis to come—"

"What crisis?"

"A new generation is growing up. Ten or fifteen years from now we'll have succeeded in erasing political and racial and religious divisions. But there'll be a new and more dangerous differentiation; a physical one. What do you think will happen when half the world is around six feet tall and the other half under three?"

"I can't imagine."

"Well, I can. The trouble is, most people don't realize what the problem will be. Things have moved too swiftly. Why, there were more changes in the last hundred years than in the previous thousand! And the rate of acceleration increases. Up until now, we've been concerned about too rapid technological development. But what we have to worry about is social development."

"Most people have been conditioned to conform."

"Yes. That's our job in Vocational Apt. But the system only works when there's a single standard of conformity. In a few years there'll be a double one, based on size. What then?"

Harry wanted some time to consider the matter, but the question was never answered. Because Lars Neilstrom went away in the night, as had his predecessors before him. And in succeeding interludes, Harry came to know a half-dozen other transient occupants of the cell next to his. They came from all over, and they had many things to discuss, but always there was the problem of why they were there—and the memory of Richard Wade's premise concerning stockpiling.

There came a time when the memory of Richard Wade merged with the memory of Arnold Ritchie. The past was a dim montage of life at the agency and the treatment center and the ranch, a recollection of lying on the river bank with women in attitudes of opisthotonos or of lying against the boulders with a rifle.

Somewhere there was an image of a child's wide eyes and a voice saying, "My name is Harry Collins." But that seemed very far away. What was real was the cell and the

years of talking and reading the microscans and trying to find a pattern.

Harry found himself describing it all to a newcomer who said his name was Austin—a soft-voiced man who became a resident of the next cell one day in 2029. And eventually he came to Wade's theory.

"Maybe there were a few wiser heads who foresaw a coming crisis," he concluded. "Maybe they anticipated a time when they might need a few nonconformists. People like ourselves who haven't been passive or persuaded. Maybe we're the government's insurance policy. If an emergency arises, we'll be freed."

"And then what would you do?" Austin asked, softly. "You're against the system, aren't you?"

"Yes. But I'm for survival." Harry Collins spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "You see, I've learned something through the years of study and contact here. Rebellion is not the answer."

"You hated Leffingwell."

"Yes, I did, until I realized that all this was inevitable. Leffingwell is not a villain and neither is any given individual, in or out of government. Our road to hell has been paved with only the very best of intentions. Killing the engineers and contractors will not get us off that road, and we're all on it together. We'll have to find a way of changing the direction of our journey. The young people will be too anxious to merely rush blindly ahead. Most of my generation will be sheeplike, moving as part of the herd, because of their conditioning. Only we old-time rebels will be capable of plotting a course. A course for all of us."

"What about your son?" Austin asked.

"I'm thinking of him," Harry Collins answered. "Of him, and of all the others. Maybe he does not need me. Maybe none of them need me. Maybe it's all an illusion. But if the time ever comes, I'll be ready. And meanwhile, I can hope."

"The time has come," Austin said, gently.

And then he was standing, miraculously enough, outside his cell and before the door to Harry's cell, and the door was opening. And once again Harry stared into the wide eyes he remembered so well—the same wide eyes, set in the face of a fullgrown man. A fullgrown man, three feet tall. He stood up, shakily, as the man held out his hand and said, "Hello, Father."

"But I don't understand—"

"I've waited a long time for this moment. I had to talk to you, find out how you really felt, so that I'd be sure. Now you're ready to join us."

"What's happening? What do you want with me?"

"We'll talk later." Harry's son smiled. "Right now, I'm taking you home."

9. Eric Donovan—2031

Eric was glad to get to the office and shut the door. Lately he'd had this feeling whenever he went out, this feeling that people were staring at him. It wasn't just his imagina-

tion: they did stare. Every younger person over a yard high got stared at nowadays, as if they were freaks. And it wasn't just the staring that got him down, either.

Sometimes they muttered and mumbled, and sometimes they called names. Eric didn't mind stuff like "dirty Naturalist." That he could understand—once upon a time, way back, everybody who was against the Leff Law was called a Naturalist. And before that it had still another meaning, or so he'd been told. Today, of course, it just meant anyone who was over five feet tall.

No, he could take the ordinary name-calling, all right. But sometimes they said other things. They used words nobody ever uses unless they really hate you, want to kill you. And that was at the bottom of it, Eric knew. They did hate him, they did want to kill him.

Was he a coward? Perhaps. But it wasn't just Eric's imagination. You never saw anything about such things on the telescreens, but Naturalists were being killed every day. The older people were still in the majority, but the youngsters were coming up fast. And there were so many more of them. Besides, they were more active, and this created the illusion that there were Yardsticks everywhere.

Eric sat down behind his desk, grinning. Yardsticks. When he was a kid it had been just the other way around. He and the rest of them who didn't get shots in those early days considered themselves to be the normal ones. And they did the name-calling. Names like "runt" and "half-pint" and "midgie." But the most common name was the one that stuck—Yardstick. That used to be the worst insult of all.

But now it wasn't an insult any more. Being taller was the insult. Being a dirty Naturalist or a son-of-a-Naturalist. Times certainly had changed.

Eric glanced at the communicator. Almost noon, and it had not flicked yet. Here he'd been beaming these big offers, you'd think he'd get some response to an expensive beaming program, but no. Maybe that was the trouble—nobody liked big things any more. Everything was small.

He shifted uneasily in his chair. That was one consolation, at least; he still had old-time furniture. Getting to be harder and harder to find stuff that fitted him these days. Seemed like most of the firms making furniture and bedding and household appliances were turning out the small stuff for the younger generation. Cheaper to make, less material, and more demand for it. Government allocated size priorities to the manufacturers.

It was even murder to ride public transportation because of the space-reductions. Eric drove his own jetter. Besides, that way was safer. Crowded into a liner with a gang of Yardsticks, with only a few other Naturalists around, there might be trouble.

Oh, it was getting to be a Yardstick world, and no mistake. Smaller furniture, smaller meals, smaller sizes in clothing, smaller buildings—

That reminded Eric of something and he frowned again. Dammit, why didn't the communicator flick? He should be getting some kind of inquiries. Hell, he was practically giving the space away!

But there was only silence, as there had been all during this past week. That's why he let Lorette go. Sweet girl, but there was no work for her here any more. No work, and no pay, either. Besides, the place spooked her. She'd been the one who suggested leaving, really.

"Eric, I'm sorry, but I just can't take this any more. All alone in this huge building—it's curling my toes!"

At first he tried to talk her out of it. "Don't be silly, luscious! There's Bernstein, down on ten, and Saltonstall above us, and Wallaby and Son on fourteen, I tell you, this place is coming back to life, I can feel it! I'll beam for tenants next week, you'll see—"

Actually he'd been talking against his own fear and Lorette must have known it. Anyway, she left. And now he was here alone.

Alone.

Eric didn't like the sound of that word. Or the absence of sound behind it. Three other tenants in a ninety-story building. Three other tenants in a place that had once held three thousand. Why, fifty years ago, when this place went up, you couldn't buy a vacancy. Where had the crowds gone to?

He knew the answer, of course. The Leff shots had created the new generation of Yardsticks, and they lived in their own world. Their shrunken, dehydrated world of dollhouses and miniatures. They'd deserted the old-fashioned skyscrapers and cut the big apartment buildings up into tiny cubicles; two could occupy the space formerly reserved for one.

That had been the purpose of the Leff shots in the first place—to put an end to overcrowding and conserve on resources. Well, it had worked out. Worked out too perfectly for people like Eric Donovan. Eric Donovan, rental agent for a building nobody wanted any more; a ninety-storey mausoleum. And nobody could collect rent from ghosts.

Ghosts.

Eric damned near jumped through the ceiling when the door opened and this man walked in. He was tall and towheaded. Eric stared; there was something vaguely familiar about his face. Something about those ears, that was it, those ears. No, it couldn't be, it wasn't possible—

Eric stood up and held out his hand. "I'm Donovan," he said.

The towheaded man smiled and nodded. "Yes, I know. Don't you remember me?"

"I thought I knew you from someplace. You wouldn't be—Sam Wolzek?"

The towheaded man's smile became a broad grin. "That's not what you were going to say, Eric. You were going to say 'Handle-head,' weren't you? Well, go on, say it. I don't mind. I've been called a lot worse things since we were kids together."

"I can't believe it," Eric murmured. "It's really you! Old Handle-head Wolzek! And after all these years, turning up to rent an office from me. Well, what do you know!"

"I didn't come here to rent an office."

"Oh? Then—"

"It was your name that brought me. I recognized it on the beamings."

"Then this is a social call, eh? Well, that's good. I don't get much company these days. Sit down, have a reef."

Wolzek sat down but refused the smoke. "I know quite a bit about your setup," he said. "You and your three tenants. It's tough, Eric."

"Oh, things could be worse." Eric forced a laugh. "It isn't as if my bucks depended

on the number of tenants in the building. Government subsidizes this place. I'm sure of a job as long as I live."

"As long as you live." Wolzek stared at him in a way he didn't like. "And just how long do you figure that to be?"

"I'm only twenty-six," Eric answered. "According to statistics, that gives me maybe another sixty years."

"Statistics!" Wolzek said it like a dirty word. "Your life-expectancy isn't determined by statistics any more. I say you don't have sixty months left. Perhaps not even sixty days."

"What are you trying to hand me?"

"The truth. And don't go looking for a silver platter underneath it, either."

"But I mind my own business. I don't hurt anybody. Why should I be in any danger?"

"Why does a government subsidy support one rental manager to sit here in this building every day—but ten guards to patrol it every night?"

Eric opened his mouth wide before shaping it for speech. "Who told you that?"

"Like I said, I know the setup." Wolzek crossed his legs, but he didn't lean back. "And in case you haven't guessed it, this is a business call, not a social one."

Eric sighed. "Might have figured," he said. "You're a Naturalist, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. We all are."

"Not I."

"Oh yes—whether you like it or not, you're a Naturalist, too. As far as the Yardsticks are concerned, everyone over three feet high is a Naturalist. An enemy. Someone to be hated, and destroyed."

"Think I'd believe that? Sure, I know they don't like us, and why should they? We eat twice as much, take up twice the space, and I guess when we were kids we gave a lot of them a hard time. Besides, outside of a few exceptions like ourselves, all the younger generation are Yardsticks, with more coming every year. The older people hold the key positions and the power. Of course there's a lot of friction and resentment. But you know all that."

"Certainly." Wolzek nodded. "All that and more. Much more. I know that up until a few years ago, no Yardstick held any public office or government position. Now they're starting to move in, particularly in Europasia. But there's so many of them now—adults, in their early twenties—that the pressure is building up. They're impatient, getting out of hand. They won't wait until the old folks die off. They want control now. And if they ever manage to get it, we're finished for good."

"Impossible!" Eric said.

"Impossible?" Wolzek's voice was a mocking echo. "You sit here in this tomb and when somebody tells you that the world you know has died, you refuse to believe it. Even though every night, after you sneak home and huddle up inside your room trying not to be noticed, ten guards patrol this place with subatomics, so the Yardstick gangs won't break in and take over. So they won't do what they did down south—overrun the office buildings and the factories and break them up, cut them down to size for living

quarters.''

''But they were stopped,'' Eric objected. ''I saw it on the telescreen, the security forces stopped them—''

''Crapola!'' Wolzek pronounced the archaicism with studied care. ''You saw films. Faked films. Have you ever traveled, Eric? Ever been down south and seen conditions there?''

''Nobody travels nowadays. You know that. Priorities.''

''I travel, Eric. And I know. Security forces don't suppress anything in the south these days. Because they're made up of Yardsticks now; that's right, Yardsticks exclusively. And in a few years that's the way it will be up here. Did you ever hear about the Chicagee riots?''

''You mean last year, when the Yardsticks tried to take over the synthetic plants at the Stockyards?''

''Tried? They succeeded. The workers ousted management. Over fifty thousand were killed in the revolution—oh, don't look so shocked, that's the right word for it!—but the Yardsticks won out in the end.''

''But the telescreen showed—''

''Damn the telescreen! I know because I happened to be there when it happened. And if you had been there, you and a few million other ostriches who sit with your heads buried in telescreens, maybe we could have stopped them.''

''I don't believe it. I can't!''

''All right. Think back. That was last year. And since the first of this year, what's happened to the standard size meat-ration?''

''They cut it in half,'' Eric admitted. ''But that's because of Ag shortages, according to the telescreen reports—'' He stood up, gulping. ''Look here, I'm not going to listen to any more of this kind of talk. By rights, I ought to turn your name in.''

''Go ahead.'' Wolzek waved his hand. ''It's happened before. I was reported when I blasted the Yardsticks who shot my father down when he tried to land his jet in a southern field. I was reported when they killed Annette.''

''Annette?''

''You remember that name, don't you, Eric? Your first girl, wasn't she? Well, I'm the guy who married her. Yes, and I'm the guy who talked her into having a baby without the benefit of Leff shots. Sure, it's illegal, and only a few of us ever try it any more, but we both agreed that we wanted it that way. A real, life-sized, normal baby. Or abnormal, according to the Yardsticks and the stupid government.

''It was a dirty scum of a government doctor who let her die on the table when he discovered the child weighed seven pounds. That's when I really woke up, Eric. That's when I knew there was going to be only one decision to make in the future—kill or be killed.''

''Annette. She died, you say?''

Wolzek moved over and put his hand on Eric's shoulder. ''You never married, did you, Eric? I think I know why. It's because you felt the way I did about it. You wanted a

regular kid, not a Yardstick. Only you didn't quite have the guts to try and beat the law. Well, you'll need guts now, because it's getting to the point where the law can't protect you any more. The government is made up of old men, and they're afraid to take action. In a few years they'll be pushed out of office all over the world. We'll have Yardstick government then, all the way, and Yardstick law. And that means they'll cut us down to size."

"But what can you—we—do about it?"

"Plenty. There's still a little time. If we Naturalists can only get together, stop being just a name and become an organized force, maybe the ending will be different. We've got to try, in any case."

"The Yardsticks are human beings, just like us," Eric said, slowly. "We can't just declare war on them, wipe them out. It's not their fault they were born that way."

Wolzek nodded. "I know. Nothing is anybody's fault, really. This whole business began in good faith. Leffingwell and some of the other geniuses saw a problem and offered what they sincerely believed was a solution."

"But it didn't work," Eric murmured.

"Wrong. It worked only too well. That's the trouble. Sure, we eliminated our difficulties on the physical level. In less than thirty years we've reached a point where there's no longer any danger of overcrowding or starvation. But the psychological factor is something we can't cope with. We thought we'd ended war and the possibilities of war a long time ago. But it isn't foreign enemies we must fear today. We've created a nation divided into Davids and Goliaths—and David and Goliath are always enemies."

"David killed Goliath," Eric said. "Does that mean we're going to die?"

"Only if we're as stupid as Goliath was. Only if we wear our telescreens like invincible armor and pay no attention to the slingshot in David's hands."

Eric lit a reef. "All right," he said. "You don't have to lecture. I'm willing to join. But I'm no Goliath, really. I never had a fight in my life. What could I do to help?"

"You're a rental agent. You have the keys to this building. The guards don't bother you by day, do they? You come and go as you please. That means you can get into the cellars. You can help us move the stuff down there. And we'll take care of the guards some night, after that."

"I don't understand."

The friendly pressure on Eric's shoulder became a fierce grip. "You don't have to understand. All you do is let us plant the stuff in the cellars and let us get rid of the guards afterwards in our own way. The Yardsticks will do the rest."

"You mean, take over the building when it's not protected?"

"Of course. They'll take it over completely, once they see there's no opposition. And they'll remodel it to suit themselves, and within a month there'll be ten thousand Yardsticks sitting in this place."

"The government will never stand still for that."

"Wake up! It's happening all over, all the time, and nothing is being done to prevent it. Security is too weak and officials are too timid to risk open warfare. So the Yardsticks

win, and I'm going to see that they win this place."

"But how will that help us?"

"You don't see it yet, do you? And neither will the Yardsticks. Until, some fine day three or four months from now, we get around to what will be planted in the cellars. Somebody will throw a switch, miles away, and—boom!"

"Wolzek, you couldn't—"

"It's coming. Not only here, but in fifty other places. We've got to fight fire with fire, Eric. It's our only chance. Bring this thing out into the open. Make the government realize this is war. Civil war. That's the only way to force them to take real action. We can't do it any other way; it's illegal to organize politically, and petitions do no good. We can't get a hearing. Well, they'll have to listen to the explosions."

"I just don't know—"

"Maybe you're the one who should have married Annette after all." Wolzek's voice was cold. "Maybe you could have watched her, watched her scream and beg and die, and never wanted to move a muscle to do anything about it afterwards. Maybe you're the model citizen, Eric; you and the thousands of others who are standing by and letting the Yardsticks chop us down, one by one. They say in Nature it's the survival of the fittest. Well, perhaps you're not fit to survive."

Eric wasn't listening. "She screamed," he said. "You heard her scream?"

Wolzek nodded. "I can still hear her. I'll always hear her."

"Yes." Eric blinked abruptly. "When do we start?"

Wolzek smiled at him. It was a pretty good smile for a man who can always hear screaming. "I knew I could count on you," he murmured. "Nothing like old friends."

"Funny, isn't it?" Eric tried to match his smile. "The way things work out. You and I being kids together. You marrying my girl. And then, us meeting up again this way."

"Yes," said Wolzek, and he wasn't smiling now. "I guess it's a small world."

10. Harry Collins—2032

Harry's son's house was on the outskirts of Washington, near what had once been called Gettysburg. Harry was surprised to find that it was a house, and a rather large one, despite the fact that almost all the furniture had been scaled down proportionately to fit the needs of a man three feet high.

But then, Harry was growing accustomed to surprises.

He found a room of his own, ready and waiting, on the second floor; here the furniture was of almost antique vintage, but adequate in size. And here, in an atmosphere of unaccustomed comfort, he could talk.

"So you're a physician, eh?" Harry gazed down into the diminutive face, striving to accept the fact that he was speaking to a mature adult. His own son—his and Sue's—a grown man and a doctor! It seemed incredible. But then, nothing was more incredible than the knowledge that he was actually here, in his child's home.

"We're all specialists in one field or another," his son explained. "Every one of us

born and surviving during the early experimental period received our schooling under a plan Leffingwell set up. It was part of his conditional agreement that we become wards of the state. He knew the time might come when we'd be needed."

"But why wasn't all this done openly?"

"You know the answer to that. There was no way of educating us under the prevailing system, and there was always a danger we might be singled out as freaks who must be destroyed—particularly in those early years. So Leffingwell relied on secrecy, just as he did during his experimentation period. You know how you felt about that. You believed innocent people were being murdered. Would you have listened to his explanations, accepted the fact that his work was worth the cost of a few lives so that future billions of human beings might be saved? No, there was no time for explanation or indoctrination. Leffingwell chose concealment."

"Yes," Harry sighed. "I understand that better now, I think. But I couldn't see it then, when I tried to kill him." He flushed. "And I still can't quite comprehend why he spared me after that attempt."

"Because he wasn't the monster you thought him to be. When I pleaded with him—"

"You were the one!"

Harry's son turned away. "Yes. When I was told who you really were, I went to him. But I was only a child, remember that. And he didn't spare you out of sentimentality. He had a purpose."

"A purpose in sending me to prison, letting me rot all these years while—"

"While I grew up. I and the others like myself. And while the world outside changed." Harry's son smiled. "Your friend Richard Wade was right, you know. He guessed a great deal of the truth. Leffingwell and Manschoff and the rest of their associates deliberately set out to assemble a select group of nonconformists—men of specialized talents and outlooks. There were over three hundred of you at Stark Falls. Richard Wade knew why."

"And so he was dragged off and murdered."

"Murdered? No, Father, he's very much alive, I assure you. In fact, he'll be here tonight."

"But why was he taken away so abruptly, without any warning?"

"He was needed. There was a crisis, when Dr. Leffingwell died." Harry's son sighed. "You didn't know about that, did you? There's so much for you to learn. But I'll let him tell you himself, when you see him this evening."

Richard Wade told him. And so did William Chang and Lars Neilstrom and all the others. During the ensuing weeks, Harry saw each of them again. But Wade's explanation was sufficient.

"I was right," he said. "There was no Underground when we were at Stark Falls. What I didn't realize, though, was that there was an Overground."

"Overground?"

"You might call it that. Leffingwell and his staff formed the nucleus. They foresaw the social crisis which lay ahead, when the world became physically divided into the tall and the short, the young and the old. They knew there'd be a need of individuality then—

and they did create a stockpile. A stockpile of the younger generation, specially educated; a stockpile of the older generation, carefully selected. We conspicuous rebels were incarcerated and given an opportunity to think the problem through, with limited contact with one another's viewpoints."

"But why weren't we told the truth at the beginning, allowed to meet face-to-face and make some sensible plans for the future?"

Harry's son interrupted. "Because Dr. Leffingwell realized this would defeat the ultimate purpose. You'd have formed your own in-group, as prisoners, dedicated to your own welfare. There'd be emotional ties—"

"I still don't know what you're talking about. What are we supposed to prepare for now?"

Richard Wade shrugged. "Leffingwell had it all planned. He foresaw that when the first generation of Yardsticks—that's what they call themselves, you know—came of age, there'd be social unrest. The young people would want to take over, and the older generation would try to remain in positions of power. It was his belief that tensions could be alleviated only by proper leadership on both sides.

"He himself had an important voice in government circles. He set up an arrangement whereby a certain number of posts would be assigned to people of his choice, both young and old. Similarly, in the various professions, there'd be room for appointees he'd select. Given a year or two of training, Leffingwell felt that we'd be ready for these positions. Young men, like your son, would be placed in key spots where their influence would be helpful with the Yardsticks. Older men such as yourself would go into other assignments—in communications media, chiefly. The skillful use of group-psychological techniques could avert open clashes. He predicted a danger-period lasting about twenty years—roughly, from 2030 to 2050. Once we weathered that span, equilibrium would be regained, as a second and third generation came along and the elders became a small minority. If we did our work well and eliminated the sources of prejudice, friction and hostility, the transition could be made. The Overground in governmental circles would finance us. This was Leffingwell's plan, his dream."

"You speak in the past tense," Harry said.

"Yes." Wade's voice was harsh. "Because Leffingwell is dead, of cerebral hemorrhage. And his plan died with him. Oh, we still have some connections in government; enough to get men like yourself out of Stark Falls. But things have moved too swiftly. The Yardsticks are already on the march. The people in power—even those we relied upon—are getting frightened. They can't see that there's time left to train us to take over. And frankly, I'm afraid most of them have no inclination to give up their present power. They intend to use force."

"But you talk as though the Yardsticks were united."

"They are uniting, and swiftly. Remember the Naturalists?"

Harry nodded, slowly. "I was one, once. Or thought I was."

"You were a liberal. I'm talking about the new Naturalists. The ones bent on actual revolution."

"Revolution?"

"That's the word. And that's the situation. It's coming to a head, fast."

"And how will we prevent it?"

"I don't know." Harry's son stared up at him. "Most of us believe it's too late to prevent it. Our immediate problem will be survival. The Naturalists want control for themselves. The Yardsticks intend to destroy the power of the older generation. And we feel that if matters come to a head soon, the government itself may turn on us, too. They'll have to."

"In other words," said Harry, "we stand alone."

"Fall alone, more likely," Wade corrected.

"How many of us are there?"

"About six hundred," said Harry's son. "Located in private homes throughout this eastern area. If there's violence, we don't have a chance of controlling the situation."

"But we can survive. As I see it, that's our only salvation at the moment—to somehow survive the coming conflict. Then, perhaps, we can find a way to function as Leffingwell planned."

"We'll never survive here. They'll use every conceivable weapon."

"But since there's no open break with the government yet, we could still presumably arrange for transportation facilities."

"To where?"

"Some spot in which we could weather the storm. What about Leffingwell's old hideout?"

"The units are still standing." Harry's son nodded. "Yes, that's a possibility. But what about food?"

"Grizek."

"What?"

"Friend of mine," Harry told him. "Look, we're going to have to work fast. And yet we've got to do it in a way that won't attract any attention; not even from the government. I suggest we set up an organizing committee and make plans." He frowned. "How much time do you think we have—a year or so?"

"Six months," his son hazarded.

"Four, at most," Wade said. "Haven't you been getting the full reports on those riots? Pretty soon they'll declare a state of national emergency and then nobody will be going anywhere."

"All right." Harry Collins grinned. "We'll do it in four months."

* * * * *

Actually, as it worked out, they did it in just a day or so under three.

Five hundred and forty-two men moved by jetter to Colorado Springs; thence, by helicopter, to the canyon hideaway. They moved in small groups, a few each week. Harry himself had already established the liaison system, and he was based at Grizek's ranch. Grizek was dead, but Bassett and Tom Lowery remained and they cooperated. Food would be ready for the 'copters that came out of the canyon.

The canyon installation itself was deserted, and the only problem it presented was one of rehabilitation. The first contingent took over.

The jetters carried more than their human cargo; they were filled with equipment of all sorts—microscans and laboratory instruments and devices for communication. By the time the entire group was assembled, they had the necessary implementation for study and research. It was a well-conceived and well-executed operation.

To his surprise, Harry found himself acting as the leader of the expedition, and he continued in this capacity after they were established. The irony of the situation did not escape him; to all intents and purposes he was now ruling the very domain in which he had once languished as a prisoner.

But with Wade and Chang and the others, he set up a provisional system which worked out very well. And proved very helpful, once the news reached them that open revolt had begun in the world outside.

A battered 'copter landed one evening at dusk, and the wounded pilot poured out his message, then his life's blood.

Angelisco was gone. Washington was gone. The Naturalists had struck, using the old, outlawed weapons. And it was the same abroad, according to the few garbled reports thereafter obtainable only via ancient shortwave devices.

From then on, nobody left the canyon except on weekly 'copter-lifts to the ranch grazing lands for fresh supplies. Fortunately, that area was undisturbed, and so were its laconic occupants. They neither knew nor cared what went on in the world outside; what cities were reported destroyed, what forces triumphed or went down into defeat, what activity or radioactivity prevailed.

Life in the canyon flowed on, more peacefully than the river cleaving its center. There was much to do and much to learn. It was, actually, a monastic existence, compounded of frugality, abstinence, continence and devotion to scholarly pursuits. Within a year, gardens flourished; within two years herds grazed the grassy slopes; within three years cloth was being woven on looms in the ancient way and most of the homespun arts of an agrarian society had been revived. Men fell sick and men died, but the survivors lived in amity. Harry Collins celebrated his sixtieth birthday as the equivalent of a second-year student of medicine; his instructor being his own son. Everyone was studying some subject, acquiring some new skill. One-time rebellious natures and one-time biological oddities alike were united by the common bond of intellectual curiosity.

It was, however, no Utopia. Some of the younger men wanted women, and there were no women. Some were irked by confinement and wandered off; three of the fleet of eleven 'copters were stolen by groups of malcontents. From time to time there would be a serious quarrel. Six men were murdered. The population dwindled to four hundred and twenty.

But there was progress, in the main. Eventually Banning joined the group, from the ranch, and under his guidance the study-system was formalized. Attempts were made to project the future situation, to prepare for the day when it would be possible to venture safely into the outside world once again and utilize newly-won abilities.

Nobody could predict when that would be, nor what kind of world would await their

coming. By the time the fifth year had passed, even shortwave reports had long since ceased. Rumors persisted that radioactive contamination was widespread, that the population had been virtually decimated, that the government had fallen, that the Naturalists had set up their own reign only to fall victim to internal strife.

"But one thing is certain," Harry Collins told his companions as they assembled in the usual monthly meeting on the grounds before the old headquarters building one afternoon in July. "The fighting will end soon. If we hear nothing more within the next few months, we'll send out observation parties. Once we determine the exact situation, we can plan accordingly. The world is going to need what we can give. It will use what we have learned. It will accept our aid. One of these days—"

And he went on to outline a carefully-calculated program of making contact with the powers that be, or might be. It sounded logical and even the chronic grumblers and habitual pessimists in the group were encouraged.

If at times they felt the situation fantastic and the hope forlorn, they were heartened now. Richard Wade summed it up succinctly afterwards, in a private conversation with Harry.

"It isn't going to be easy," he said. "In the old science fiction yarns I used to write, a group like this would have been able to prevent the revolution. At the very least, it would decide who won if fighting actually broke out. But in reality we were too late to forestall revolt, and we couldn't win the war no matter on whose side we fought. There's just one job we're equipped for—and that's to win the peace. I don't mean we'll step out of here and take over the world, either. We'll have to move slowly and cautiously, dispersing in little groups of five or six all over the country. And we'll have to sound out men in the communities we go to, find those who are willing to learn and willing to build. But we can be an influence, and an important one. We have the knowledge and the skill. We may not be chosen to lead, but we can teach the leaders. And that's important."

Harry smiled in agreement. They did have something to offer, and surely it would be recognized—even if the Naturalists had won, even if the entire country had sunk into semi-barbarism. No use anticipating such problems now. Wait until fall came; then they'd reconnoitre and find out. Wait until fall—

It was a wise decision, but one which ignored a single, important fact. The Naturalists didn't wait until fall to conduct their reconnaissance.

They came over the canyon that very night; a large group of them in a large jetter.

And they dropped a large bomb....

11. Jesse Pringle—2039

They were after him. The whole world was in flames, and the buildings were falling, the mighty were fallen, the Day of Judgment was at hand.

He ran through the flames, blindly. Blind Samson. Eyeless in Gaza, treading at the mill. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small.

Small. They were all small, but that didn't matter. They had the guns and they were

hunting him down to his doom. Day of doom. Doomsday. The great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns was abroad in the land.

They had unleashed the dragon and his breath was a fire that seared, and his tail was a thunder that toppled towers. The dragon was searching him out for his sins; he would be captured and set to labor in the mill.

But he would escape, he must escape! He was afraid of them, small as they were, and great oaks from little acorns grow, it's the little things that count, and he dare not go a-hunting for fear of little men.

Jesse crouched against the dock, watching the grain-elevators burn. The whole city was burning, Babylon the mighty, the whole world was burning in God's final wrath of judgment.

Nobody believed in God any more, nobody read the Bible, and that's why they didn't know these things. Jesse knew, because he was an old man and he remembered how it had been when he was a little boy. A little boy who learned of the Word of God and the Wrath of God.

He could see the reflection of the flames in the water, now, and the reflection was shimmery and broken because of the black clusters floating past. Large clusters and small clusters. There were bodies in the water, the bodies of the slain.

Thunder boomed from the city behind him. Explosions. That's how it had started, when the Naturalists began blowing up the buildings. And then the Yardsticks had come with their weapons, hunting down the Naturalists. Or had it been that way, really? It didn't matter, now. That was in another country and besides, the wench was dead.

The wench is dead. His wench, Jesse's wench. She wasn't so old. Only seventy-two. But they killed her, they blew off the top of her head and he could feel it when they did. It was as if something had happened in his head, and then he ran at them and screamed, and there was great slaughter amongst the heathen, the forces of unrighteousness.

And Jesse had fled, and smote evil in the name of the Lord, for he perceived now that the time was at hand.

How the mighty are fallen.

Jesse blinked at the water, wishing it would clear, wishing his thoughts would clear. Sometimes for a moment he could remember back to the way things really were. When it was still a real world, with real people in it. When he was just a little boy and everybody else was big.

Strange. Now he was an old man, a big old man, and almost everybody else was little.

He tried to think what it had been like, so long ago. It was too long. All he could remember about being small was that he had been afraid. Afraid of the bigger people.

And now he was big, and afraid of the smaller people.

Of course they weren't real. It was just part of the prophecy, they were the locusts sent to consume and destroy. He kept telling himself there was nothing to fear; the righteous need not fear when the day of judgment is at hand.

Only somewhere inside of him was this little boy, crying, "Mama, Mama, Mama!"

And somewhere else was this old man, just staring down into the water and waiting for them to find him.

Another explosion sounded.

This one was closer. They must be bombing the entire city. Or else it was the dragon, lashing his tail.

Somebody ran past Jesse, carrying a torch. No, it wasn't a torch—his hair was on fire. He jumped into the water, screaming, "They're coming! They're coming!"

Jesse turned and blinked. They were coming, all right. He could see them pouring out of the alleyway like rats. Rats with gleaming eyes, gleaming claws.

Suddenly, his head cleared. He realized that he was going to die. He had, perhaps, one minute of life left. One minute out of eighty years. And he couldn't fool himself any longer. He was not delirious. Day of judgment—that was nonsense. And there was no dragon, and these were not rats. They were merely men. Puny little men who killed because they were afraid.

Jesse was a big man, but he was afraid, too. Six feet three inches tall he was, when he stood up straight as he did now, watching them come—but he knew fear.

And he resolved that he must not take that fear with him into death. He wanted to die with something better than that. Wasn't there something he could find and cling to, perhaps some memory—?

A minute is so short, and eighty years is so long. Jesse stood there, swaying, watching them draw nearer, watching them as they caught sight of him and raised their weapons.

He scanned rapidly into the past. Into the past, before the time the wench was dead, back to when you and I were young, Maggie, back still earlier, and earlier, seeking the high point, the high school, that was it, the high school, the highlight, the moment of triumph, the game with Lincoln. Yes, that was it. He hadn't been ashamed of being six feet three inches then, he'd been proud of it, proud as he raised his arms and—

Splashed down into the water as the bullets struck.

And that was the end of Jesse Pringle. Jesse Pringle, champion basketball center of the Class of '79....

12. Littlejohn—2065

The helicopter landed on the roof, and the attendants wheeled it over to one side. They propped the ladder up, and Littlejohn descended slowly, panting.

They had a coasterchair waiting and he sank into it, grateful for the rest. Hardy fellows, these attendants, but then they were almost three feet tall. More stamina, that was the secret. Common stock, of course, but they served a purpose. Somebody had to carry out orders.

When they wheeled the coasterchair into the elevator, Littlejohn descended. The elevator halted on the first floor and he breathed a sigh of relief. Great heights always made him faint and dizzy, and even a short helicopter trip took its toll—the mere thought

of soaring two hundred feet above the ground was enough to paralyze him.

But this journey was vital. Thurmon was waiting for him.

Yes, Thurmon was waiting for him here in the council chamber. The coasterchair rolled forward into the room and again Littlejohn felt a twinge of apprehension. The room was vast—too big for comfort. It must be all of fifty feet long, and over ten feet in height. How could Thurmon stand it, working here?

But he had to endure it, Littlejohn reminded himself. He was head of the council.

Thurmon was lying on the couch when Littlejohn rolled in, but he sat up and smiled.

"I greet you," he said.

"I greet you," Littlejohn answered. "No, don't bother to stay seated. Surely we don't need to be ceremonious."

Thurmon pricked up his ears at the sound of the unfamiliar word. He wasn't the scholarly type, like Littlejohn. But he appreciated Littlejohn's learning and knew he was important to the council. They needed scholars these days, and antiquarians too. One has to look to the past when rebuilding a world.

"You sent for me?" Littlejohn asked. The question was purely rhetorical, but he wanted to break the silence. Thurmon looked troubled as he replied.

"Yes. It is a matter of confidence between us."

"So be it. You may speak in trust."

Thurmon eyed the door. "Come nearer," he said.

Littlejohn pressed a lever and rolled up to the couchside. Thurmon's eyes peered at him through the thick contact lenses. Littlejohn noted the deep wrinkles around his mouth, but without surprise. After all, Thurmon was an old man—he must be over thirty.

"I have been thinking," Thurmon said, abruptly. "We have failed."

"Failed?"

Thurmon nodded. "Need I explain? You have been close to the council for many years. You have seen what we've attempted, ever since the close of the Naturalist wars."

"A magnificent effort," Littlejohn answered politely. "In less than thirty years an entire new world has risen from the ruins of the old. Civilization has been restored, snatched from the very brink of a barbarism that threatened to engulf us."

"Nonsense," Thurmon murmured.

"What?"

"Sheer nonsense, Littlejohn. You're talking like a pedant."

"But I am a pedant." Littlejohn nodded. "And it's true. When the Naturalists were exterminated, this nation and other nations were literally destroyed. Worse than physical destruction was the threat of mental and moral collapse. But the Yardstick councils arose to take over. The concept of small government came into being and saved us. We began to rebuild on a sensible scale, with local, limited control. The little community arose—"

"Spare me the history lesson," said Thurmon, dryly. "We rebuilt, yes. We survived. In a sense, perhaps, we even made certain advances. There is no longer any economic

rivalry, no social distinctions, no external pressure. I think I can safely assume that the danger of future warfare is forever banished. The balance of power is no longer a factor. The balance of Nature has been partially restored. And only one problem remains to plague mankind."

"What is that?"

"We face extinction," Thurmon said.

"But that's not true," Littlejohn interrupted. "Look at history and—"

"Look at us." Thurmon sighed. "You needn't bother with history. The answer is written in our faces, in our own bodies. I've searched the past very little, compared to your scholarship, but enough to know that things were different in the old days. The Naturalists, whatever else they might have been, were strong men. They walked freely in the land, they lived lustily and long.

"Do you know what our average life-expectancy is today, Littlejohn? A shade under forty years. And that only if one is fortunate enough to lead a sheltered existence, as we do. In the mines, in the fields, in the radioactive areas, they die before the age of thirty."

Littlejohn leaned forward. "Schuyler touches on just that point in his Psychology of Time," he said, eagerly. "He posits the relationship between size and duration. Time is relative, you know. Our lives, short as they may be in terms of comparative chronology, nevertheless have a subjective span equal to that of the Naturalists in their heyday."

"Nonsense," Thurman said, again. "Did you think that is what concerns me—whether or not we feel that our lives are long or short?"

"What then?"

"I'm talking about the basic elements essential to survival. I'm talking about strength, stamina, endurance, the ability to function. That's what we're losing, along with the normal span of years. The world is soft and flabby. Yardstick children, they tell us, were healthy at first. But their children are weaker. And their grandchildren, weaker still. The effect of the wars, the ravages of radiation and malnutrition, have taken a terrible toll. The world is soft and flabby today. People can't walk any more, let alone run. We find it difficult to lift and bend and work—"

"But we won't have to worry about such matters for long," Littlejohn hazarded. "Think of what's being done in robotics. Those recent experiments seem to prove—"

"I know." Thurmon nodded. "We can create robots, no doubt. We have a limited amount of raw materials to allocate to the project, and if we can perfect automatons they'll function quite adequately. Virtually indestructible, too, I understand. I imagine they'll still be able to operate efficiently a hundred or more years from now—if only they learn to oil and repair one another. Because by that time, the human race will be gone."

"Come now, it isn't that serious—"

"Oh, but it is!" Thurmon raised himself again, with an effort. "Your study of history should have taught you one thing, if nothing else. The tempo is quickening. While it took mankind thousands of years to move from the bow and arrow to the rifle, it took only a few hundred to move from the rifle to the thermonuclear weapon. It took ages before men mastered flight, and then in two generations they developed satellites; in three, they reached the moon and Mars."

"But we're talking about physical development."

"I know. And physically, the human race altered just as drastically in an equally short span of time. As recently as the nineteenth century, the incidence of disease was a thousandfold greater than it is now. Life was short then. In the twentieth century disease lessened and life-expectancy doubled, in certain areas. Height and weight increased perceptibly with every passing decade. Then came Leffingwell and his injections. Height, weight, life-expectancy have fallen perceptibly every decade since then. The war merely hastened the process."

"You appear to have devoted a great deal of time to this question," Littlejohn observed.

"I have," answered the older man. "And it is not a question. It is a fact. The one fact that confronts us all. If we proceed along our present path, we face certain extinction in a very short time. The strain is weakening constantly, the vitality is draining away. We sought to defeat Nature—but the Naturalists were right, in their way."

"And the solution?"

Thurmon was silent for a long moment. Then, "I have none," he said.

"You have consulted the medical authorities?"

"Naturally. And experiments have been made. Physical conditioning, systems of exercise, experimentation in chemotherapy are still being undertaken. There's no lack of volunteers, but a great lack of results. No, the answer does not lie in that direction."

"But what else is there?"

"That is what I had hoped you might tell me," Thurmon said. "You are a scholar. You know the past. You speak often of the lessons of history—"

Littlejohn was nodding, but not in agreement. He was trying to comprehend. For suddenly the conviction came to him clearly; Thurmon was right. It was happening, had happened, right under their smug noses. The world was weakening. It was slowing down, and the race is only to the swift.

He cursed himself for his habit of thinking in platitudes and quotations, but long years of study had unfitted him for less prosaic phraseology. If he could only be practical.

Practical.

"Thurmon," he said. "There is a way. A way so obvious, we've all overlooked it—passed right over it."

"And that is—?"

"Stop the Leffingwell injections!"

"But—"

"I know what you'll say. There have been genetic mutations. Very true, but such mutations can't be universal. A certain percentage of offspring will be sound, capable of attaining full growth. And we don't have the population-problem to cope with any more. There's room for people again. So why not try it? Stop the injections and allow babies to be born as they were before." Littlejohn hesitated before adding a final word, but he knew he had to add it; he knew it now. "Normally," he said.

Thurmon nodded. "So that is your answer."

"Yes. I—I think it will work."

"So do the biologists," Thurmon told him. "A generation of normal infants, reared to maturity, would restore mankind to its former stature, in every sense of the word. And now, knowing the lessons of the past, we could prepare for the change to come. We could rebuild the world for them to live in, rebuild it psychically as well as physically. We'd plan to eliminate the rivalry between the large and the small, the strong and the weak. It wouldn't be difficult because there's plenty for all. There'd be no trouble as there was in the old days. We've learned to be psychologically flexible."

Littlejohn smiled. "Then that is the solution?" he asked.

"Yes. Eliminating the Leffingwell injections will give us a good proportion of normal children again. But where do we find the normal women to bear them?"

"Normal women?"

Thurmon sighed, then reached over and placed a scroll in the scanner. "I have already gone into that question with research technicians," he said. "And I have the figures here." He switched on the scanner and began to read.

"The average nubile female, aged thirteen to twenty-one, is two feet, ten inches high and weighs forty-eight pounds." Thurmon flicked the switch again and peered up. "I don't think I'll bother with pelvic measurements," he said. "You can already see that giving birth to a six or seven-pound infant is a physical impossibility under the circumstances. It cannot be done."

"But surely there must be some larger females! Perhaps a system of selective breeding, on a gradual basis—"

"You're talking in terms of generations. We haven't got that much time." Thurmon shook his head. "No, we're stopped right here. We can't get normal babies without normal women, and the only normal women are those who began life as normal babies."

"Which comes first?" Littlejohn murmured. "The chicken or the egg?"

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Just an old saying. From history."

Thurmon frowned. "Apparently, then, that's all you can offer in your professional capacity as an historian. Just some old sayings." He sighed. "Too bad you don't know some old prayers. Because we need them now."

He bowed his head, signifying the end of the interview.

Littlejohn rolled out of the room.

His 'copter took him back to his own dwelling, back across the rooftops of New Chicagee. Ordinarily, Littlejohn avoided looking down. He dreaded heights, and the immensity of the city itself was somehow appalling. But now he gazed upon the capital and center of civilization with a certain morbid affection.

New Chicagee had risen on the ashes of the old, after the war's end. Use of thermonucs had been limited, fortunately, so radioactivity did not linger, and the vast craters hollowed out by ordinary warheads had been partially filled by rubble and debris. Artificial fill had done the rest of the job, so that now New Chicagee was merely a flat prairie as it must have been hundreds of years ago—a flat prairie on which the city had been

resurrected. There were almost fifty thousand people here in the capital; the largest congregation of population on the entire continent. They had built well and surely this time, built for the security and certainty of centuries to come.

Littlejohn sighed. It was hard to accept the fact that they had been wrong; that all this would end in nothingness. They had eliminated war, eliminated disease, eliminated famine, eliminated social inequality, injustice, disorders external and internal—and in so doing, they had eliminated themselves.

The sun was setting in the west, and long shadows crept over the city below. Yes, the sun was setting and the shadows were gathering, the night was coming to claim its own. Darkness was falling, eternal darkness.

It was quite dark by the time Littlejohn's 'copter landed on the rooftop of his own dwelling; so dark, in fact, that for a moment he didn't see the strange vehicle already standing there. Not until he had settled into his coasterchair did he notice the presence of the other 'copter, and then it was too late. Too late to do anything except sit and stare as the gigantic shadow loomed out of the night, silhouetted against the sky.

The shadow shambled forward, and Littlejohn gaped, gaped in terror at the titanic figure. He opened his mouth to speak, but words did not form; there were no words to form, for how does one address an apparition?

Instead, it was the apparition which spoke.

"I have been waiting for you," it said.

"Y-yes—"

"I want to talk to you." The voice was deep, menacing.

Littlejohn shifted in his coasterchair. There was nowhere to go, no escape. He gazed up at the shadow. Finally he summoned a response. "Shall we go inside?" he asked.

The figure shook its head. "Where? Down into that dollhouse of yours? It isn't big enough. I've already been there. What I have to say can be said right here."

"W-who are you?"

The figure stepped forward, so that its face was illuminated by the fluorescence streaming from the open door which led to the inclined chairway descending to Littlejohn's dwelling.

Littlejohn could see the face, now—the gigantic, wrinkled face, scarred and seared and seamed. It was a human face, but utterly alien to the humanity Littlejohn knew. Faces such as this one had disappeared from the earth a lifetime ago. At least, history had taught him that. History had not prepared him for the actual living presence of a—

"Naturalist!" Littlejohn gasped. "You're a Naturalist! Yes, that's what you are!"

The apparition scowled.

"I am not a Naturalist. I am a man."

"But you can't be! The war—"

"I am very old. I lived through your war. I have lived through your peace. Soon I shall die. But before I do, there is something else which must be done."

"You've come here to kill me?"

"Perhaps." The looming figure moved closer and stared down. "No, don't try to sum-

mon help. When your servants saw me, they fled. You're alone now, Littlejohn."

"You know my name."

"Yes, I know your name. I know the names of everyone on the council. Each of them has a visitor tonight."

"Then it is a plot, a conspiracy?"

"We have planned this very carefully, through the long years. It's all we lived for, those few of us who survived the war."

"But the council wasn't responsible for the war! Most of us weren't even alive, then. Believe me, we weren't to blame—"

"I know." The gigantic face creased in senile simulation of a smile. "Nobody was ever to blame for anything, nobody was ever responsible. That's what they always told me. I mustn't hate mankind for multiplying, even though population created pressure and pressure created panic that drove me mad. I mustn't blame Leffingwell for solving the overpopulation problem, even though he used me as a guinea-pig in his experiments. I mustn't blame the Yardsticks for penning me up in prison until revolution broke out, and I mustn't blame the Naturalists for bombing the place where I took refuge. So whose fault was it that I've gone through eighty years of assorted hell? Why did I, Harry Collins, get singled out for a lifetime of misery and misfortune?" The huge old man bent over Littlejohn's huddled form. "Maybe it was all a means to an end. A way of bringing me here, at this moment, to do what must be done."

"Don't harm me—you're not well, you're—"

"Crazy?" The old man shook his head. "No, I'm not crazy. Not now. But I have been, at times, during my life. Perhaps we all are, when we attempt to face up to the complications of an average existence, try to confront the problems which are too big for a single consciousness to cope with in a single life-span. I've been crazy in the city, and crazy in the isolation of a cell, and crazy in the welter of war. And perhaps the worst time of all was when I lost my son.

"Yes, I had a son, Littlejohn. He was one of the first, one of Leffingwell's original mutations, and I never knew him very well until the revolution came and we went away together. He was a doctor, my boy, and a good one. We spent almost five years together and I learned a lot from him. About medicine, but that wasn't important then. I'm thinking of what I learned about love. I'd always hated Yardsticks, but my son was one, and I came to love him. He had plans for rebuilding the world, he and I and the rest of us. We were going to wait until the revolution ended and then help restore sanity in civilization.

"But the Naturalists flew over and dropped their bomb, and my boy died. Over four hundred of our group died there in the canyon—four hundred who might have changed the fate of the world. Do you think I can forget that? Do you think I and the few others who survived have ever forgotten? Can you blame us if we did go crazy? If we hid away out there in the western wilderness, hid away from a world that had offered us nothing but death and destruction, and plotted to bring death and destruction to that world in return?

"Think about it for a moment, Littlejohn. We were old men, all of us, and the world had given us only its misery to bear during our lifetimes. The world we wanted to save

was destroying itself; why should we be concerned with its fate or future?

"So we changed our plans, Littlejohn. Perhaps the shock had been too much. Instead of plotting to rebuild the world, we turned our thoughts to completing its destruction. Our tools and texts were gone, buried in the rubble with the bodies of fine young men. But we had our minds. Crazed minds, you'd call them—but aware of reality. The grim reality of the post-revolutionary years.

"We burrowed away in the desert. We schemed and we dreamed. From time to time we sent out spies. We knew what was going on. We knew the Naturalists were gone, that six-footers had vanished from a Yardstick world. We knew about the rehabilitation projects. We watched your people gradually evolve new patterns of living and learning. Some of the former knowledge was rescued, but not all. Our little group had far more learning than you've ever dreamed of. Fifty of us, between ourselves, could have surpassed all your scientists in every field.

"But we watched, and we waited. And some of us died of privation and some of us died of old age. Until, at last, there were only a dozen of us to share the dream. The dream of destruction. And we knew that we must act swiftly, or not at all.

"So we came into the world, cautiously and carefully, moving unobtrusively and unobserved. We wanted to contemplate the corruption, seek out the weaknesses in your degenerate civilization. And we found them, immediately. Those weaknesses are everywhere apparent, for they are physical. You're one of a dying race, Littlejohn. Mankind's days are numbered. There's no need for grandiose schemes of reactivating warheads in buried missile-centers, of loosing thermo-nucs upon the world. Merely by killing off the central council here in New Chicagee, we can accomplish our objective. A dozen men die, and there's not enough initiative left to replace them. It's as simple as that. And as complicated."

Harry Collins nodded. "Yes, as complicated. Because the only weaknesses we've observed are physical ones. We've seen enough of the ways of this new civilization to realize that.

"All of the things I hated during my lifetime have disappeared now—the crowding, the competition, the sordid self-interest, the bigotry, intolerance, prejudice. The antisocial aspects of society are gone. There is only the human race, living much closer to the concept of Utopia than I ever dreamed possible. You and the other survivors have done well, Littlejohn."

"And yet you come to kill us."

"We came for that purpose. Because we still retained the flaws and failings of our former cultures. We looked for targets to blame, for villains to hate and destroy. Instead, we found this reality.

"No, I'm not crazy, Littlejohn. And I and my fellows aren't here to execute revenge. We have returned to the original plan; the plan Leffingwell had, and my son, and all the others who worked in their own way for their dream of a better world. We come now to help you. Help you before you die—before we die."

Littlejohn looked up and sighed. "Why couldn't this have happened before?" he murmured. "It's too late now."

"But it isn't too late. My friends are here. They are telling your fellow council-members the same thing right now. We may be old, but we can still impart what we have learned. There are any number of technological developments to be made. We can help you to increase your use of atomic power. There's soil reclamation and irrigation projects and biological techniques—"

"You said it yourself," Littlejohn whispered. "We're a dying race. That's the primary problem. And it's an insoluble one. Just this afternoon—" And he told him about the interview with Thurmon.

"Don't you understand?" Littlejohn concluded. "We have no solution for survival. We're paying the price now because for a while we wouldn't heed history. We tried to defeat Nature and in the end Nature has defeated us. Because we would not render unto Caesar the things which are—"

Harry Collins smiled. "That's it," he said.

"What?"

"Caesar. That's the answer. Your own medical men must have records. I know, because I learned medicine from my son. There used to be an operation, in the old days, called a caesarean section—used on normal women and on dwarfs and midgets too, in childbirth. If your problem is how to deliver normal children safely, the technique can be revived. Get hold of some of your people. Let's see what data you have on this. I'll be glad to furnish instruction—"

There was excitement after that. Too much excitement for Littlejohn. By the time the council had assembled in emergency session, by the time plans were formulated and he returned to his own dwelling in the helicopter, he was completely exhausted. Only the edge of elation sustained him; the realization that a solution had been found.

As he sank into slumber he knew that he would sleep the clock around.

And so would Harry Collins. The old man and his companions, now guests of the council, had been temporarily quartered in the council-chambers. It was the only structure large enough to house them and even so they had to sleep on the floor. But it was sufficient comfort for the moment.

It was many hours before Harry Collins awoke. His waking was automatic, for the tiny telescreen at the end of the council room glowed suddenly, and the traditional voice chirped forth to interrupt his slumber.

"Good morning," said the voice. "It's a beautiful day in New Chicagee!"

Harry stared at the screen and then he smiled.

"Yes," he murmured. "But tomorrow will be better."

THE END

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LONG AGO, FAR AWAY

CHAPTER 1

The sky was black, with myriads of stars. The ground was white. But it was not really ground at all, it was ice that covered everything—twenty miles north to the Barrier, and southward to the Pole itself, past towering mountains and howling emptiness and cold beyond imagining.

The base was almost buried in snow. Off to one side of the main building a faint yellowish glow was the plastic dome of the meteor-watch radar instrument. Inside Brad Soames displayed his special equipment to a girl reporter flown down to the Antarctic to do human-interest articles for not-too-much-interested women readers.

All was quiet. This seemed the most unlikely of all possible places for anything of importance to happen.

There was one man awake, on stand-by watch. A radio glowed beside him—a short-wave unit, tuned to the frequency used by all the bases of all the nations on Antarctica—English, French, Belgian, Danish, Russian. The stand-by man yawned. There was nothing to do.

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"There's no story in my work," said Soames politely. "I work with this wave-guide radar. It's set to explore the sky instead of the horizon. It spots meteors coming in from space, records their height and course and speed, and follows them down until they burn up in the air. From its record we can figure out the orbits they followed before Earth's gravity pulled them down."

The girl reporter was Gail Haynes. She nodded, but she looked at Soames instead of the complex instrument. She wore the multi-layer cold-weather garments issued for Antarctica, but somehow she did not look grotesque in them. Now her expression was faintly vexed. The third person in the dome was Captain Estelle Moggs, W. A. C., in charge of Gail's journey and the public-relations angle

generally.

"I just chart the courses of meteors," repeated Soames. "That's all. There is nothing else to it."

Gail shook her head, watching him.

"Can't you give me a human angle?" she asked. "I'm a woman. I'd like to be interested."

He shrugged, and she said somehow disconsolately:

"What will knowing the orbits of meteors lead to?"

"Finding out some special meteor-orbits," he said drily, "might lead to finding out when the Fifth Planet blew itself up.—According to Bode's Law there ought to be a planet like ours between Mars and Jupiter. If there was, it blew itself to pieces, or maybe the people on it had an atomic war."

Gail cocked her head to one side.

"Now, that promises!" she said. "Keep on!"

"There ought to be a planet between Mars and Jupiter, in a certain orbit," he told her. "There isn't. Instead, there's a lot of debris floating around. Some is as far out as Jupiter. Some is as far in as Earth. It's mostly between Mars and Jupiter, though, and it's hunks of rock and metal of all shapes and sizes. We call the big ones asteroids. There's no proof so far, but it's respectable to believe that there used to be a Fifth Planet, and that it blew itself up or was blown up by its inhabitants. I'm checking meteor-orbits to see if some meteors are really tiny asteroids."

"Hmmm," said Gail. She displayed one of those surprising, unconnected bits of information a person in the newspaper business picks up. "Don't they say that the mountains on the moon were made by asteroids falling on it?"

"It's at least possible that the moon was smashed up by fragments of the Fifth Planet," agreed Soames. "In fact, that's a more or less accepted explanation."

She looked at him expectantly. "I have to think of my readers," insisted Gail. "It's interesting enough, but how can I make it something they'll be concerned about? When the moon was smashed, why wasn't Earth?"

"It's assumed that it was," Soames told her. "But on Earth we have weather, and it happened a long, long time ago, back in the days of three-toed horses and ganoid fish. Undoubtedly once the Earth was devastated like the moon. But the ring-mountains were worn away by rain and snow. New mountain-ranges rose up. Continents changed. Now there's no way to find even the traces of a disaster so long past. But the moon has no weather. Nothing ever changes on it. Its wounds have never healed."

Gail frowned in concentration.

"A bombardment like that would be something to live through," she said vexedly. "An atomic war would be trivial by comparison. But it happened millions

and millions of years ago. We women want to know about things that are happening now!"

Soames opened his mouth to speak. But he didn't.

The flickering, wavering, silver-plated wave-guide tube of the radar suddenly steadied. It ceased to hunt restlessly among all places overhead for a tiny object headed for Earth. It stopped dead. It pointed, trembling a little as if with eagerness. It pointed somewhere east of due south, and above the horizon.

"Here's a meteor. It's falling now," said Soames.

Then he looked again. The radar's twin screens should have shown two dots of light, one to register the detected object's height, and another its angle and distance. But both screens were empty. They showed nothing at all. There was nothing where the radar had stopped itself and where it aimed. But all of the two screens glowed faintly. The graph-pens wrote wholly meaningless indications on their tape. A radar, and especially a meteor-tracking radar, is an instrument of high precision. It either detects something and pin-points its place, or it doesn't, because an object either reflects radar-pulses or not. Usually it does.

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The radar here, then, gave an impossible reading. It was as if it did not receive the reflections of the pulses it sent out, but only parts of them. It was as if something were intermittently in existence, or was partly real and partly not. Or as if the radar had encountered an almost-something which was on the verge of becoming real, and didn't quite make it.

"What the—"

The inter-base radio screamed. At the same instant the twin radar-screens flashed bright all over. The twin pens of the tape-writing machine scrambled crazy lines on the paper. The noise was monstrous. A screaming, shrieking uproar such as no radio ever gave out. There was horror in it. And what Soames could not know now was that at this same instant the same sound came out of every radio and television set in use in all the world.

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The noise stopped. Now a bright spot showed on each of the meteor-watch radar's twin screens. The screen indicating height said that the source of the dot was four miles high. The screen indicating line and distance said that it bore 167° true, and was eighty miles distant. The radar said that some object had come into being from nothingness, out of nowhere. It had not arrived. It had become. It was twenty thousand feet high, eighty miles 167° from the base, and its appearance had been accompanied by such a burst of radio-noise as neither storm nor lightning nor atomic explosion had ever made before.

And the thing which came from nowhere and therefore was quite impossible, now moved toward the east at roughly three times the speed of sound.

All manner of foreign voices came startledly out of the inter-base radio speaker, asking what could it be? A Russian voice snapped suspiciously that the Americans should be queried.

And the wave-guide radar followed a large object which had come out of nowhere at all.

The sheer impossibility of the thing was only part of the problem it presented. The radar followed it. Moving eastward, far away in the frigid night, it seemed suddenly to put on brakes. According to the radar, its original speed was close to mach 3, thirty-nine miles a minute. Then it checked swiftly. It came to a complete stop. Then it hurtled backward along the line it had followed. It wabbled momentarily as if it had done a flip-flop four miles above the ground. It dived. It stopped dead in mid-air for a full second and abruptly began to rise once more in an insane, corkscrew course which ended abruptly in a headlong fall toward the ground.

It dropped like a stone. It fell for long, long seconds. Once it wavered, as if it made a final effort to continue its frenzy in the air. But again it fell like a stone. It reached the horizon. It dropped behind it.

Seconds later the ground trembled very, very slightly. Soames hit the graph-machine case. The pens jiggled. He'd made a time-recording of an earth-shock somewhere.

Now he read off the interval between the burst of screaming static and the jog he'd made by striking the instrument. Earth-shock surface waves travel at four miles per second. The radar had said the thing which appeared in mid-air did so eighty miles away. The static-burst was simultaneous. There was a twenty-second interval between the static and the arrival of the earth-tremor waves. The static and the appearance of something from nowhere and the point of origin of the earth-shock matched up. They were one event. The event was timed with the outburst of radio noise, not the impact of the falling object, which was a minute later.

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Soames struggled to imagine what that event could be. The inter-base radio babbled. Somebody discovered that the static had been on all wave-lengths at the same time. Voices argued about it.

In the radar-dome Captain Moggs said indignantly:

"This is monstrous! I shall report this to Washington! What was that thing, Mr. Soames?"

Soames shrugged.

"There isn't anything it could be," he told her. "It was impossible. There couldn't be anything like that."

Gail cocked her head on one side.

"D'you mean it's something new to science?"

Soames realized how much he liked Gail. Too much. So he spoke with great formality. The radar had tried to detect and range on something that wasn't there. The nearest accurate statement would be that the radar had detected something just before it became something the radar could detect, which did not begin to make sense.

Planes didn't appear in mid-sky without previously having been somewhere else; it wasn't a plane. There could be meteors, but it wasn't a meteor because it went too slowly and changed course and stood still in the air and went upward. Nor was it a missile. A ballistic missile couldn't change course, a rocket-missile would show on the radar.

He looked at his watch.

"Six minutes and a half from the static," he said grimly. "Eighty miles. Sound travels a mile every five seconds. Let's listen. Ten seconds—eight—six—four—"

Now the wave-guide radar had gone back to normal operation. Its silver-plated square tube flickered and quivered and spun quickly in this direction and that, searching all the sky.

There was a booming sound. It was infinitely low-pitched. It was long-continued. It was so low in frequency that it seemed more a vibration of the air than a sound.

It died away.

"It's a concussion-wave," said Soames soberly. "It arrived four hundred odd seconds after the static. Eighty miles.... A noise has to be pretty loud to travel so far! A ground-shock has to be rather sharp to be felt as an earth-tremor at eighty miles. Even a spark has to be very, very fierce to mess up radio and radar reception at eighty miles.... Something very remarkable happened down yonder tonight—something somebody ought to look into."

Gail said quickly, "How about a spaceship from another world?"

"It would have come in from outer space," said Soames. "It didn't."

"A secret weapon," said Captain Moggs firmly. "I shall report to Washington and ask orders to investigate."

"I wouldn't," said Soames. "If you ask orders you promise to wait for them. If you wait for orders, whatever fell will be covered by snow past discovery by the time your orders come."

Gail looked at him interestedly, confidently.

"What will you do, then?"

"I think," said Soames, "we'll find it and then report.

"You were planning a cosey little article on Housewives of the Antarctic; The Care and Feeding of One's Penguin Husband. Right?"

Gail grinned suddenly.

"I see. Yes."

"We take off in the 'copter," said Soames. "We start out ostensibly to gather material for an article on Can This Penguin Marriage Be Saved. But we'll be blown off course. We'll find ourselves quite accidentally where the radar said there was the great-grandfather of static bursts, with a ground-shock and a concussion-wave to boot. We may even be blown farther, to where something dived downward for four or five miles and vanished below the horizon."

Captain Moggs said uneasily:

"Most irregular. But it might be wise."

"Of course," said Soames. "It's always safer to report something you've found than not find something you've reported."

"We start at sunrise," said Captain Moggs authoritatively.

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Soames went back to the radar. As he looked at it, it picked out something rather smaller than a marble at a height of seventy-nine miles and followed that unthinkably ancient small wanderer of space down to its spectacular suicide by fire at a height of thirty-four miles.

He went painstakingly over the radar. It worked perfectly. The taped record of its observations carried the story of all that Gail and Captain Moggs had seen when he saw it. Machinery may err, but it does not have delusions. It would have to be subject to systematic hallucination to have reported and recorded what this radar insisted was the truth.

When dawn came, he went out to the helicopter's hangar. There was a supply-plane on the runway, but the helicopter belonged at the base. He found himself excessively conscientious in his check-over. Though he hated to admit it, he knew it was because Gail would be in the plane.

When he headed back toward the main building one of the geophysics gang beckoned to him. He followed to the small, far-spaced hut—now snow-buried to its eaves—in which the seismograph ticked away to itself.

"I think I'm going crazy," said the geophysics man. "Did you ever hear of a ground-shock starting inside out?"

He pointed to the graph-paper that fed very, very slowly past the seismograph's pens. The recording did look odd.

"If you put your hand just under the surface of the water in a bathtub," said the geophysics man harassedly, "and jerk it downward, you get a hollow that spreads out with a wave behind it. It's the exact opposite of dropping a pebble into water, which makes a wave that spreads out with a hollow—a trough—behind it. But except for that one way of making it, all waves—absolutely all wave-systems—start out with a crest and a trough behind it. Everywhere, all the time, unless you do

what I said in a bathtub.''

''I'm a shower man, myself,'' observed Soames. ''But go on.''

''This,'' said the geophysics man bitterly, ''is like a bathtub wave. See? The ground was jerked away, and then pushed back. Normal shock-waves push away and then spring back! An ice-crack, a rock-slide, an explosion of any sort, all of them make the same kind of waves! All have compression phases, then rarefaction phases, then compression phases, and so on. What—'' his voice was plaintive—''what in hell is this?''

''Are you saying,'' Soames asked after a moment, ''that ordinary earth-tremors record like explosion-waves, but that you'd have to have an implosion to make a record like this?''

''Sure!'' said the geophysics man. ''But how can you have an implosion that will make an earth-shock? I'm going to have to take this whole damned wabble-bucket apart to find out what's the matter with it! But there's nothing the matter! It registered what it got! But what did it get?''

''An implosion,'' said Soames. ''And if you have trouble imagining that, I'm right there with you.''

He went back to the main building to get Gail and Captain Moggs. They went out to the 'copter hangar together.

''I've talked to the radar and loran operator,'' said Soames. ''I explained that you wanted to see some crevasses from the air, and I'd be wandering around looking for them on the way to the rookery. He will check on us every fifteen minutes, anyhow.''

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The 'copter went up the long, sloping, bulldozed snow-ramp. Soames checked his radio contact. He nodded. The engines hummed and roared and bellowed, and the ship lifted deliberately and floated away over the icy waste.

The little helicopter was very much alone above a landscape which had never known a growing thing.

Soames kept in radar contact and when he was ready he told the base, ''I'm going down now, hunting crevasses.''

He let the 'copter descend. The waste was featureless, then and for a seemingly interminable time afterward. Then his estimated position matched the site of the static-earth-shock-concussion-wave-occurrence. There seemed nothing about this part of the snow-desert which was different from any other part. No. Over to the left. A wind-pattern showed in the snow. It was already being blown away; its edges dulled. But it was rather far from a probable thing. There were lines—hollows—where gusts had blown at the snow's surface. They were spiral lines, tending toward a center. They had not the faintest resemblance to the crater

of an explosion which might have made an earth-shock.

Soames took a camera out of its place in the 'copter. Gail stared down.

"I've seen something like that," she said puzzledly. "Not a picture. Certainly not a snow-field. I think it looks like a diagram of some sort."

"Try a storm-wind diagram," said Soames drily. "The way a cyclone ought to look from directly overhead. The meteorology boys will break down and cry when they see this picture!"

He took pictures. The shadows of the wind-made indentations would come out clearly in the film.

"Unless," said Soames, "unless somebody got a snap of a whirlwind touching a snow-field and bouncing up again, this will be a photographic first. It's not an explosion-pattern, you'll notice. Wind and snow weren't thrown away from the center. They were drawn toward it. Momentarily. It's an explosion inside out, an implosion-pattern to be more exact."

"I don't understand," said Gail.

"An explosion," said Soames grimly, "is a bursting-out of a suddenly present mass of gas. An implosion is a bursting-in of a suddenly present vacuum. Set off a firecracker and you have an explosion. Break an electric bulb and you have an implosion. That pattern behind us is an implosion-pattern."

"But how could such a thing be?"

"If we knew," said Soames wrily, "maybe we'd be running away. Maybe we should."

The 'copter droned on and on and on. The ice-sheet continued unbroken.

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"There!" cried Gail, suddenly.

She pointed. Blowing snow hid everything. Then there was a hole in the whiteness, a shadow. The shadow stirred and an object too dark to be snow appeared. It vanished again.

"There's a sheltered place!" said Gail, "and there's something dark in it!"

Soames pulled the microphone to his lips.

"Calling base," he said briefly. "Calling base.... Hello! I'm well beyond the last radar-fix. I think I'm bearing about one seven oh degrees from base. Get a loran fix on me. Make it quick. I may have to land."

He listened, pressing a button to activate the loran-relay which would transmit a signal on signal from the base, so the bearing and distance could be computed back at base. It was wiser to have such computations done aground. He readied the camera again.

Gail looked through the 'copter's binoculars. The peculiar shadow—hole—opening in the blowing snow reappeared. Something in it looked like a missile,

only it was bright metal and much too large. It lay askew on the ice. A part of it—a large part—was smashed.

"Spaceship?" asked Gail, "do you think that's it?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Soames.

There was movement. One—two—three figures stared up from beside the metal shape. A fourth appeared. Soames grimly took pictures. Gail gasped suddenly:

"They're not men!" she said shakily. "Brad, they're children! Queerly dressed children, with bare arms and legs! They're out there on the snow! They'll freeze! We've got to help them!"

"Calling base," said Soames into the microphone. "I'm landing. I have to. If I don't report in twenty minutes come with caution—repeat with caution—to see what's happened. I repeat. If I do not report in twenty minutes come with caution, caution, caution to see what is the matter."

The 'copter made a loud, loud noise as it went skittering down toward the object—and the children—on the ice.

CHAPTER 2

The snow-mist blew aside and there was plainly a ship lying partly crushed upon the snow. Half its length was smashed, but he could see that it had never flown with wings. There weren't any.

"It looks like a spaceship," said Gail breathlessly.

Soames spoke between set teeth.

"That would finish things for all of us!"

And it would, without any qualifications. On a world already squabbling and divided into two main power-groups and embittered neutrals; on a world armed with weapons so deadly that only the fear of retaliation kept the peace.... Contact with a farther-advanced race would not unite humanity, either for defense or for the advantages such a contact might reasonably bring. Instead, it would detonate hatred and suspicion into madness.

A higher civilization could very well tip the scales, if it gave one side weapons. The world outside the Iron Curtain could not risk that the Iron Curtain nations become best friends of possible invaders. The communist leaders could not risk letting the free nations make alliance with a higher technology and a greater science. So actual contact with a more-advanced race would be the most deadly happening that could take place on the world as it was today.

* * * * *

Soames jumped out. He looked at the ship and felt sick. But he snapped a quick photograph. It had no wings and had never owned any. It had been probably a

hundred feet long, all bright metal. Now nearly half of it was crushed or crumpled by its fall. It must have been brought partly under control before the impact, though, enough to keep it from total destruction. And Soames, regarding it, saw that there had been no propellers to support it or pull it through the air. There were no air-ducts for jet-motors. It wasn't a jet.

There were no rockets, either. The drive was of a kind so far unimagined by men of here and now.

Gail stood beside Soames, her eyes bright. She exclaimed, "Brad! It isn't cold here!"

The children looked at her interestedly. One of the girls spoke politely, in wholly unintelligible syllables. The girls might be thirteen or thereabouts. The boys were possibly a year older, sturdier and perhaps more muscular than most boys of that age. All four were wholly composed. They looked curious but not in the least alarmed, and not in the least upset, as they'd have been had older companions been injured or killed in the ship's landing. They wore brief garments that would have been quite suitable for a children's beach-party in mid-summer, but did not belong on the Antarctic ice-cap at any time. Each wore a belt with moderately large metal insets placed on either side of its fastening.

"Brad!" repeated Gail. "It's warm here! Do you realize it? And there's no wind!"

Soames swallowed. The camera hung from his hand. It either was or it could be a spaceship that lay partly smashed upon the ice. He looked about him with a sort of total grimness. There was a metal girder, quite separate from the ship, which had apparently been set up slantingly in the ice since the landing. It had no apparent purpose.

Captain Moggs said peremptorily:

"Children! We insist on speaking to your parents! At once!"

Gail moved forward. Soames saw, now, a small tripod near the ship. Something spun swiftly at its top. It had plainly been brought out from inside the strange vessel. For a hundred yards in every direction there was no wind or snow. More than that, the calm air was also warm. It was unbelievable.

"Do you hear me?" demanded Captain Moggs. "Children!"

Gail said in a friendly fashion, smiling at the girls:

"I'm sure you don't understand a word I say, but won't you invite us to visit?"

Her tone and manner were plainly familiar to the children. One of the two girls smiled and stood aside for Gail to enter the ship. Soames and Captain Moggs followed.

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It was quite as bright inside the ship as out-of-doors. There were no lights. It was simply bright. A part of the floor had buckled upward, and the rest was not

level, but the first impression was of brilliance and the second was of a kind of simplicity which was bewildering. And there was a third. It was of haste. The ship seemed to have been put together with such urgent haste that nothing had been done for mere finish or decoration.

"I want to speak to the parents of these children!" said Captain Moggs firmly. "I insist upon it!"

"I suspect," said Soames grimly, "that in the culture these children came from, the proper place for parents is the home. This is a child-size spaceship, you'll notice."

The size of the door and chairs proved it. He saw through a crumpled, open doorway into the crushed part of the ship. There was machinery in view, but no shafts or gears or power-leads. He guessed it to be machinery because it could not be anything else. He saw a dented case of metal, with an opened top. The boys had apparently dragged it into the relatively undamaged part of the ship to work upon its contents. He could see coils of bare metal, and arrangements which might have been inductances. He took a sort of forlorn pride in guessing that the thing was some sort of communication-device.

There was a board with buttons on it. It might be a control-board, but it didn't look like it. There was a metal box with a transparent plastic front. One could see cryptic shapes of metal inside. Two bright-metal balls mounted on a side-wall. They had holes in them, about the right size for the hands of children like these to enter. There was a two-foot, carefully machined spiral of metal, intruding into and lessening the living-space of the ship. These things had functions he could not even guess at. He found himself resentful of things which were obviously the developments of science, and he could not even guess what they were for.

But alien? He looked at the boys. They were human children. They had absolutely nothing of strangeness about them. Their hair, their eyes and eyelashes were normal. Their noses. Their lips. Their teeth. In every respect they were as human as he was, or Gail.

He looked to the most urgent problem of the moment. He snapped pictures, before anything else.

One of the boys turned to the dented metal case. He began to arrange its contents in a somehow final fashion. Soames guessed that it had been damaged in the landing, and they'd made a repair.

The second boy touched Soames' elbow and showed him the box with the clear plastic front. He touched it, and an image appeared in the plastic. It was an image of the landscape outside. He shifted the box, and the landscape image flashed sidewise. He touched another control. The landscape flowed swiftly toward the viewer. It raced. Presently the ground seemed to drop away and Soames found himself staring at a picture which showed the ice-sheet and the sky and—

very far away—the dark blue line which was the sea, now a hundred miles distant.

The boy nodded and made delicate adjustments. Then Soames looked at an image of the Gissell Bay base from which he and the others had set out an hour before. It was a remarkably clear image. Soames could even see the supply-plane waiting on the runway until it was time for take-off. He knew unhappily that the box was something which was not a radar, but performed all the functions of one and so many others that it was a different thing entirely.

Then Gail said:

"Brad! Look at this!"

She held out two necklaces that the girls had given her. She showed him the ornaments at their ends. One was a very tiny horse. It was beautifully done, and obviously from life. The head was larger than an ordinary horse's head would be. The body was lightly built. Each of its tiny feet had three toes.

Gail watched Soames' face.

"You see? How about this?"

The ornament of the other necklace was a tiny metal fish. It had fins and a tail, but no scales. Instead, its body was protected by bony armor. It was a ganoid fish, like a sturgeon. But it was not a sturgeon, though sturgeons are now the main representatives of what once were innumerable ganoid species.

Soames shook his head, then spoke to Gail and Captain Moggs. "The ship was built for children to operate, I can't imagine why. But there's nothing like a weapon in view. I'm going to call Base before they get alarmed."

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He made a report which sounded as if there were some minor trouble with the 'copter and he'd landed. It did not check with his last call speaking insistently of caution, but he couldn't help it. Other bases were on the same wave-length. He said he'd call back. He intended to call for help—in handling the matter of the children—as soon as it would seem plausible that he needed help to get off the ground again.

But he felt shaky, inside. The radar-report and the static and earth-shock and concussion-wave of the night before had been improbable enough. But this was more incredible still. The children's ship must have appeared in the middle of all those unlikely phenomena. It was reasonable for it to have crashed amid such violence. But where had it come from, and why?

They were human and they were members of a culture beside which the current culture on Earth was barbaric. It could not be an Earth civilization. On a world where for thousands of years men had killed each other untidily in wars, and where they now prepared to destroy themselves wholly in a final one, there was no pos-

sibility of such a civilization existing in secret. But where was it?

Soames stood by the 'copter, staring bemusedly at the ship. The two boys came out. They went briskly to the shattered part of the ship and picked up a metal girder neatly matching the one that leaned absurdly where it was fixed in the icy surface. By the ease of their movements, it could not be heavy. It would have to be aluminum or magnesium to be so light. Magnesium alloy, at a guess.

One boy held it upright by the slanting beam. The other produced a small object Soames could not see. He bent over the ice and moved his hand to and fro. The new girder sank into the ice. They slanted it to meet the one already fixed. They held it fast for a moment. They went back to the wrecked ship. The second girder remained fixed, like the first one.

Soames went to look. The metal beam was deeply imbedded in the ice which somehow did not chill the air above it.

He heard a small sound. One of the boys, the one in the brown, tunic-like shirt, swept something across the plating of the crumpled vessel. The plating parted like wet paper. Soames watched in a sort of neither believing nor unbelieving detachment. A whole section of plating came away. The boy in the brown tunic very briskly trimmed plating away from a strength-member and had a third metal beam. Whatever instrument he used, it cut metal as if it were butter.

Both boys brought the third beam to where the others leaned to form a tripod. But this third bit of metal was curved. They lowered it, and the boy in the brown tunic matter-of-factly sliced through the metal, took out a V-shaped piece, and obviously made the rest of the metal whole once more. They raised it again, the boy moved his hand over the ice, it sank into it, they held it a moment only, and went off to the ship.

Soames went numbly to see what had happened. He picked up scraps of the trimmed-away metal.

Soames puzzled over the metal scraps. They did not look cut. They had mirror-bright surfaces, as if melted apart. But there'd been no flame....

The boys reappeared with the dented case that Soames guessed was a communication device of some sort. They carried it to the new tripod. One of them carried, also, a complicated structure of small rods which could be an antenna-system to transmit radiation of a type that Soames could not conceive of.

Captain Moggs came towards him from the 'copter.

"I called Base," she said. "Two snow-weasels will start here within the hour. Another 'copter is due in from an advanced observation post at any moment. It will be sent here as soon as it arrives."

Soames wondered numbly just how indiscreet she'd been, in a short-wave conversation that could be picked up by any of the other-nation bases that cared to listen in. But, just then, Gail came out of the ship.

"Brad," she said anxiously, "what are the boys doing?"

Soames knew only too well. If the dented case contained a communicator, which would use so complicated an antenna as lay ready for use, there could only be one answer. And there could be only one thing for him to do, considering everything.

"They're shipwrecked. They're setting up something to signal for help with. They've landed on a world of rather primitive savages and they want somebody to come and take them away."

"It mustn't be permitted!" said Captain Moggs firmly. "The ship must be examined! In our modern world, with the military situation what it is...."

Soames looked at her ironically.

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He had metal scraps in his hand, those he'd picked up to examine as a savage might examine sawdust. There was a threadlike extension of metal from one scrap. He twisted it off and put it on his sleeve. He struck a light with his cigarette lighter. He touched it to the fibre of metal. There was a burst of flame. His sleeve was singed.

"Mostly magnesium," he said detachedly. "It's possible that they don't think of fire as a danger. They may not use fire any more. We don't light our houses with open flames any longer. They may not use flames at all. But I'm a savage. I do."

He sorted through the bits of silvery metal. Another morsel had a wire-like projection. He saw the boy with the green tunic laying something on the snow, from the ship to the tripod.

"A power-line," he said appalled. "They've got to signal nobody knows how far, with nobody can guess how much power in the signal. And they use power-leads the size of sewing-thread! But of course the people who built this ship would have superconductors!" Then he said, "I may be committing suicide, but I think I ought to, rather than let ..."

He moved forward. His throat was dry. He struck his lighter and touched the flame to the thread of metal on the second scrap. It flared. He threw the whole piece just as all the flammable alloy caught fire. In mid-air it became a ball of savage white incandescence that grew larger and fiercer as it flew. It was a full yard in diameter when it fell upon the dented case the boys had brought here.

That burst into flame. The new-made tripod caught. Flame leaped thirty feet into the air. Soames was scorched and blinded by the glare. Then the fire died swiftly and snow-white ash-particles drifted down on every hand.

The boy in the brown tunic cried out fiercely. He held out his hand with the thing that had cut metal glittering in it.

Soames faced the fourteen-year-old grimly. The boy's face was contorted.

There was more than anger in it. The boy in the green tunic clenched and unclenched his hands. His expression was purest horror. One of the girls sobbed. The other spoke in a tone of despair so great and grief so acute that Soames was almost ashamed.

Then the boy in the brown tunic spoke very, very bitterly to the girl who'd evidently said something to restrain him. He turned his eyes from Soames. He went into the ship, stumbling a little.

The whole air of the three remaining children changed utterly. They had been composed and confident and even zestful. They'd acted as if the wrecking of their ship were an adventure rather than a catastrophe. But now they were dazed by disaster. First one of the girls, and then the second boy, and then the other girl went despairingly into the ship.

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Soames looked at Gail. The boy in the brown tunic had pointed at him with the object that cut metal plates in half. He'd been stopped, most likely, by the girl's grief-stricken words. Soames had a profound conviction that the boy could easily have killed him. He had an equally strong conviction that it could have been a low price to pay for preventing the rest of these children's race from finding Earth.

"I suppose," said Gail, "that you feel pretty badly."

"I'm a savage. I've destroyed their signalling device. I may have kept their civilization from destroying ours. I feel like a murderer," he told her grimly. "And of children, at that. With luck, I may have kept them from ever seeing their families again."

After a long time Gail said with a curiously mirthless attempt at humor:

"Do you know, this is the biggest news story that's ever happened? And do you know that nobody would believe it?"

"But this," said Captain Moggs firmly, "is a matter of such military importance that nothing must be said about it at all! Nothing!"

Soames made no comment, but he didn't think the matter could be kept secret.

They waited. The children stayed in the ship.

After a very long time the children appeared again. The girls' faces were tear-streaked. They brought small possessions and placed them neatly in the snow. They went back for more.

"At a guess," said Soames, "that super-radar of theirs has shown them a 'copter on the way. They know they can't stay here. I've made it impossible for them to hope to be found. They've got to let themselves be taken away and they want to keep these things."

The bringing-out of small objects ended. The boy in the brown tunic went

back in the ship.

When he re-emerged, he said something in the bitterest of bitter voices. The girls turned their backs to the ship. The girl with brown eyes began to weep. The boy in the green tunic shifted the small tripod to a new position. As he carried it, the calmness and the warmth of the air changed remarkably. There was a monstrous gust of icy wind, and warm calm, and another gust. But when he put the tripod down again there was only calm once more.

Soames heard the droning of another 'copter, far away.

The boy in the green tunic held out his hand. It had the glittering tiny object in it. From a fifty-foot distance, he swept his hand from one end to the other of the wrecked ship. Flame leaped up. The magnesium-alloy vessel burned with a brightness that stung and dazzled the eyes. A monstrous, a colossal flaming flare leaped and soared ... and died. Too late, Soames fumbled for his camera. There was no longer a wrecked ship on the ice. There were only a few, smoking, steaming fragments.

When the second 'copter landed beside the first, the four children were waiting composedly to be taken away.

CHAPTER 3

The world's affairs went on as usual. There were the customary number of international crises. The current diplomacy preferred blackmail by threat of atomic war.

Naturally, even Antarctica could be used to create turmoil. The population of the continent was confined to the staffs of research-bases established during the International Geophysical Year. In theory the bases were an object-lesson in cooperation for a constructive purpose, which splendid spirit of mutual trust and confidence must spread through the world and some day lead to an era of blissful and unsuspicious peacefulness.

But that time was not yet.

There'd been an outburst of static of an unprecedented kind.

It had covered the globe on all wave-lengths, everywhere of absolute maximum volume. It had used millions of times as much power as any signal ever heard before. No atom bomb could have made it. Science and governments, together, raised three very urgent questions. Who did it? How did they do it? And, why did they do it?

Each major nation suspected the others. Scientific progress had become the most urgent need of every nation, and was expected to be the end of all of them.

At Gissell Bay, however, the two 'copters came droning in, and settled down, and Gail and Soames and Captain Moggs got out, and instantly picked up a boy or

a girl and hurried to get them out of the bitter cold.

The staff reacted immediately to the children. They tried to be reassuring. They tried to find a language the children could understand. They failed. Then when the children spoke slowly and carefully, they searched at least for familiar root-sounds. They found nothing. But certainly the children felt themselves surrounded by people who wished them well.

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The base photographer developed and printed Soames' pictures. The design of the ship was clear and the children before it gave it scale. The interior pictures were not so good, wrongly focused. Still, there was plenty to substantiate Soames' report.

Aside from the pictures there were the things the children had selected to be brought. There was a cooking-pot. Its substance conducted heat in one direction only. Heat could enter its outside surface, but not leave it. Heat could leave its inside surface, but not enter it. Consequently, when the lid was on, the outer surface absorbed heat from the air around it and the inner surface released it, and the contents of the pot boiled merrily without fuel, while the outside became coated with frost.

Some of the physicists went about in a state of shock, trying to figure out how it happened. Others, starry-eyed, pointed out that if the cooking-pot had been a pipe, it could be submerged under a running river, yield live steam by cooling off the water that flowed past it, and that water would regain normal river temperature in the course of a few miles of sunlit flow. In such a case, what price coal and petroleum? In fact, what price atomic power?

The small tripod went up outside the base's main building. Instantly the spinner began to turn, the wind ceased. In minutes the air ceased to be biting. In tens of minutes it was warm. Meteorologists, refusing to believe their senses, explored the boundaries of the calm area. They came back, frost-bitten, swearing that there was a drop of eighty degrees beyond the calm area, and a rise of temperature beyond the cold belt. The tripod-spinner was a different application of the principle of the cooking-pot. Somehow the spinning thing made an area that heat could enter but not leave, and wind could not blow through. If the device could be reversed, deserts would become temperate zones. As it was, the Arctic and Antarctic could be made to bloom. The gadget was an out-of-doors heat-pump.

There was the box with the plastic sheet in it. One of the boys, very composed, operated it. On request, he opened it up. There was nothing in the case but a few curiously shaped bits of metal. The thing was too simple to be comprehensible when one did not know the principle by which it worked.

The same trouble showed up with every device examined.

These were important matters. Captain Moggs visibly grew in her own esti-

mation. She commandeered a supply plane and took off immediately for Washington with the news of the event she'd witnessed, prints of Soames' photographs, and samples of the children's possessions which could be carried on her person.

* * * * *

Back at the base the most urgent problem was communication with the children. So Gail began gently to teach the taller girl some few English words. Very shortly she greeted Soames anxiously when he came to see how the process went.

"Her name," said Gail, "is Zani. The other girl—the one with blue eyes—is Mal, and the boy in the brown tunic is Fran and the one in the green is Hod. She understands that there's a language to be learned. She's writing down words in some sort of writing of her own. She was bewildered when I handed her a ballpoint pen, but she understood as soon as I demonstrated. They must write with something else.

"But—what happens next? What's going to happen to the children? They've no friends, no family, nobody to care what happens to them! They're in a terrible fix, Brad!"

"For which I'm responsible," said Soames grimly, "and about which I'm already jittering."

"I'm responsible too!" said Gail quickly. "I helped! What are you worrying about?"

"They burned up their ship," said Soames more grimly still. "Why?"

She shook her head, watching his expression.

"They treated us like harmless savages in the beginning," he said. "Then I destroyed their only hope of getting in touch with their families and friends. So one of the boys destroyed their ship. But the others knew, and got ready for it by bringing some possessions out of it. Why?"

"I'm not sure ..." said Gail.

"If we'd captured their ship intact," Soames told her, "we'd have studied it. Either we'd have come to understand it, so we could build one too, or if we couldn't—being savages—we'd have given up entirely. In either case the children wouldn't matter to us. They'd simply have been castaways. As it is, they've got us where they want us. I suspect they've got some trinkets to trade with us, as we might offer beads to bushmen. Let them or help them signal to their families, they'll say, and their parents will make us all rich."

Gail considered. Then she shook her head.

"It won't work. We've got newspapers and news broadcasts. People will be too scared to allow it."

"Scared of four children?" demanded Soames.

"You don't realize what newspapers are," Gail said with a trace of wryness.

"They don't live by printing news. They print 'true' stories, serials. 'True' crime stories, to be continued tomorrow. 'True' international-crisis suspense stories, for the next thrilling chapter read tomorrow's paper or tune in to this station! That's what's printed and broadcast, Brad. It's what people want and insist on. Don't you realize how the children will be served up in the news? 'Creatures From Space in Antarctica! Earth Helpless!'" She grimaced. "There won't be any demand for human-interest stories by Gail Haynes, telling about four nicely-raised children who need to be helped to get back to their parents. The public wouldn't like that so much.

"You'll see," Gail continued, "I'm very much afraid, Brad, that presently you and I will be the only people in the world who don't think the children had better be killed, for safety. You did the right thing for us, in not letting them signal to their families. But you don't need to worry about too much sympathy for the children!"

"And I got them into it," said Soames, morosely.

"We did," insisted Gail. "And we did right. But I'm going to do what I can to keep it from being worse for them than I can help. If you'll join me—"

"Naturally!" said Soames.

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He went moodily away. He was unaware of Gail's expression as she looked after him. She turned slowly to the girl with her.

He found the other three children. They were the center of an agitated group of staff-members, trying to communicate by words and gestures, while the children tried not to show disturbance at their vehemence. A cosmic-particle specialist told Soames the trouble. Among the children's possessions there was a coil of thread-fine copper wire. Somebody had snipped off a bit of it for test, and discovered that the wire was superconductive. A superconductor is a material which has no electrical resistance whatever. In current Earth science tin and mercury and a few alloys could be made into superconductors by being cooled below 18° Kelvin, or four hundred odd degrees Fahrenheit below zero. Above that temperature, superconductivity did not exist. But the children's wire was a superconductor at room temperature. A thread the size of a cobweb could carry all the current turned out by Niagara without heating up. A heavy-duty dynamo could be replaced by a superconductive dynamo that would almost fit in one's pocket. A thousand-horse-power motor would need to be hardly larger than the shaft it would turn. It would mean ...

"Let 'em alone!" snapped Soames. "They couldn't tell you how it was made, even if they could talk English! Give them a chance to learn how to talk! They've had a bad time anyhow."

He took the boys and the other girl away. He led them to his own quarters. He whistled for his dog, Rex, and showed the children how to play with him. They

began to relax and enjoy the fun heretofore unknown to them.

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Soames left his quarters and held his head. There was much to worry about. For example, Captain Moggs in Washington, there to pass on information perfectly calculated to bring about confusion. And at the base itself a completely natural routine event took place to make the confusion twice confounded.

The director of the Gissell Bay base made his normal, regular, short-wave report to the scientific organization which controlled and co-ordinated the base's activities and kept it supplied and equipped. The Gissell Bay director was an eminent scientist. He talked comfortably to an even more eminent scientist in the capital of the United States. Naturally, the static scream was mentioned in Washington. As naturally, the discovery of a crashed spaceship came up. It was important. It should be reported. It was. The Gissell Bay director went into details about the children and about the gadgets they'd selected to be salvaged when they destroyed their ship. A complete account preceded Captain Moggs to Washington, but not to the military. She was in charge of that angle.

The eminent scientist in Washington naturally discussed the report with other scientists who would naturally be as much concerned as himself. Later in the morning, one of those scientists received a reporter. The reporter asked various routine questions. In all innocence, the scientist who had been told by the scientist who had been told by the director at Gissell Bay, told the reporter.

And therefore, as Captain Moggs rode toward the Pentagon she did not notice the headlines, but they had already been seen in the Pentagon.

"SPACESHIP LANDS IN ANTARCTICA!

Alien Life Forms Aboard

Scientists Alarmed."

No newspaper would spoil a good story by underplaying it. Wire services wasted no time. There were other similar headlines all over the United States.

It should be added that the first editions of the first newspapers to print the story did mention that the invaders were in appearance like human children, but somehow it did not sound plausible. Also, other sorts of descriptions were more exciting. The description of children as invaders was classed as a guess. Then as a bad guess. Then as something so preposterous that it wasn't worth relating. Anyhow the point of the story was that a ship from off the Earth had landed, with intelligent beings in it, equipped with marvellous devices. And marvellous devices would naturally—in the state of the world at that time—be weapons. So rewrite men expanded the news service dispatches by the sound business-like rule that the public is entitled to get what it wants. The public likes to be scared.

A lieutenant-general greeted Captain Moggs at the Pentagon.

"This business is true?" he demanded. "A spaceship from off Earth has landed? It had a crew? The crew's still alive? Hell and damnation! What weapons have they got?"

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Captain Moggs stammered but managed to give answers. They did not give an impression of a properly complete investigation of the landing of an alien spaceship. In particular, her statement that the crew of the ship was human children simply did not register.

"Hah!" said the lieutenant-general, bitterly. "Nothing to go on! You, Captain whatever-your-name-is, you were there when the ship was found, you say. Very well. Keep your mouth shut. Get a plane and go back."

He addressed his men, "Bring up all their stuff, the stuff they brought from their ship. Get the stray unburned parts of their ship. Get our guided missile men set to work on them and find out how the drive worked. They ought to come up with something! Round up some special-weapons men to investigate those fragments too. See what they've got! Work from these pictures until we've got the samples." He swung back to Captain Moggs. "You go back and bring those aliens and everything that can be brought! Bring everything! And in the meantime," he looked around his office, "a lid goes on this! Top secret—top-top secret! The newspapers have to be choked off. Deny everything!"

He waved his hand. She left the office.

Her plane was barely south of Virginia when a spokesman for the Pentagon assured a news conference that the Defense Department had no information about an alleged non-terrestrial spaceship landing in Antarctica. The newspaper reporters pulled newspapers from their pockets. The Pentagon had been denying things right and left, in obedience to orders. Now the newspapers printed reproductions of United Nations records, showing that at the request of the Defense Department four United Nations passports had been issued. The records said that the passports were for Jane and John Doe, and Ruth and Richard Roe, who obviously could not enter the United States without proper documents. The UN information on those persons was: birthplace, unknown; nationality, unknown; age, unknown; description, not given; race, unknown; occupation, unknown. And all the newspapers carried headlines about **"SPACESHIP CREW US-BOUND."** Or:

"TAKE US TO YOUR PRESIDENT"—ALIENS

Spaceship Crew Demands Top-Level Conference.

Ultimatum Hinted At

It was not, of course, exclusively an American affair. The London Times pointed out the remarkable amount of detailed speculation in the air, as compared with the minute amount of admitted facts. But elsewhere: Pravda insisted that the aliens

had refused to enter into discussions with America after learning of its capitalistic social system and tyrannical government. Ce Soir claimed exclusive private information that the crew of the spaceship—which was twelve hundred metres long—were winged monsters of repellant aspect. The official newspaper in Bucharest, to the contrary, said that they were intelligent reptiles. In Cairo it was believed and printed that the spacecraft was manned by creatures of protean structure, remarkably resembling legendary djinns.

There were other descriptions, all attributing monstrous qualities and brutally aggressive actions to the aliens.

And at Gissell Bay the staff became rather fond of four young people whose names were Zani, Fran, Hod and Mal, because they had been very well brought up by their parents and were thoroughly nice children.

* * * * *

They were tense, and they were desperately anxious and uneasy. But they displayed a resolute courage that made moderately decent people like them very much. Most of the research-staff wanted very badly to ask them questions, but that was impossible, so they studied the rather fuzzy photographs of the inside of the ship—the base photographer had run off several sets of extra prints—and poked helplessly at the things the children had brought with them, and racked their brains to imagine how such things work. The spinning thing atop the tripod made it quite pleasant to be out-of-doors around the Gissell Bay base, though there were forty-mile winds and thermometers read ten below zero two hundred yards from the thing Hod had set up. The cooking-pot boiled merrily without fuel, with an increasingly thick layer of frost on its outside. The thing Soames had called a super-radar allowed a penguin rookery to be watched in detail without disturbing the penguins, and Fran obligingly loaned his pocket instrument—the one that cut metal like butter—to the physicists of the staff.

He had to show them how to use it, though. It was a flat metal case about the size of a pocket cigarette lighter. It had two very simple controls, and a highly ingenious gimmick which kept it from turning itself on by accident.

In an oblique fashion, it was a heat-pump. One control turned it on and intensified or diminished its effect. The other controlled the area it worked on. In any material but iron, it made heat flow together toward the center of its projected field. Pointed at a metal bar, the heat from both ends flowed to the center, where the pocket device was aimed. The center became intensely hot. The rest went intensely cold. In seconds a bronze bar turned red-hot along a line a hundredth of an inch thick. Then it melted, a layer the thickness of tissue-paper turned liquid and one could pull the bar apart or slide it sidewise to separate it. But one needed to hold the bar in thick gloves, because liquid air could drip off if one were not careful. And it did not work on iron or steel.

Soames took Fran with Mal and Hod, to the improvised schoolroom where Gail labored to give Zani a minimum vocabulary of English words. Rex went happily along with the others.

Zani greeted the dog rapturously. She got down on the floor with him and tussled with him, her face beaming.

Soames' mouth dropped open. The other children hadn't known there was such a thing as a dog. They'd had to learn to play with Rex. But Zani knew about dogs and how to play with them on sight.

"I suppose," said Gail, not knowing of Soames' astonishment, "Zani will help me teach the other children some words."

But the boy Hod had picked up the ball-point pen Gail had needed to show Zani the use of. He didn't need to be shown. Without a glance at it, he began to write. A moment later he read off, slowly and clumsily and from the completely cryptic marks he'd made, the English words that Gail had taught Zani. Fran and Mal joined him. They painstakingly practiced the pronunciation of words Gail had taught Zani but not them.

It was another development that did not make sense.

CHAPTER 4

Captain Moggs landed and went directly to the main building of the base. The children were playing with Rex.

"Children," she said with authority, "go inside and pack up. We are going back to the United States."

The girl Mal seemed to understand and went to tell the others.

Captain Moggs came upon Soames, feverishly making up bundles of objects the children had brought out of their ship before Fran—in the brown tunic—had burned it. Captain Moggs said approvingly:

"You must have anticipated my orders! But I thought it unwise to tell you by radio on the inter-base wave-length."

Soames said curtly:

"I don't know anything about your orders. They're refuelling your ship now. We need to get it aloft with Gail and the kids inside of fifteen minutes.

"We were clearing away a snow-weasel to take to the woods," he growled. "Not the woods, but the wilds. We've got company coming."

"Impossible!" said Captain Moggs. "I have top-level orders for this whole affair to be hushed up. The existence of the children is to be denied. Everybody is to deny everything. Visitors cannot be permitted! It's absolutely unthinkable!"

Soames grinned mirthlessly.

"It's six hours since the French asked if they might come over for a social call.

We stalled them. The English suggested a conference about the extrawd'n'ry burst of static the other night. They were stalled off too. But just about an hour ago the Russians pulled their stunt. Emergency S.O.S. One of their planes with engine trouble. Can't get home. It's heading this way for an emergency landing, convoyed by another plane. Can you imagine us refusing permission for a ship in trouble to land?"

"I don't believe it's in trouble!" said Captain Moggs angrily.

"Neither do I," said Soames.

He passed a wrapped parcel to one side.

"They must be acting on orders," he said coldly. "And we don't know what their orders are. Until we realized you'd get here first, we were making ready to take the kids off in a snow-weasel. If we kept to soft snow, no plane could land near them. It's just possible somebody could claim the kids asked protection from us decadent, warmongering Americans, and they might be equipped to shoot it out. We aren't."

Some of the base specialists appeared to help Soames carry the parcels to the transport.

Gail appeared, muffled up for travel. Fran and Zani were with her, similarly clothed. They carried garments for the others.

Captain Moggs fled to the communications room to demand radio contact to Washington. But the radio was busy. The French, having been stalled off when they suggested a visit, were now urged to call immediately. The English, similarly put off, were now invited to drop in for tea. As Captain Moggs sputtered, the radio went on to organize a full-scale conference on common observational problems, plus a seminar on Antarctic scientific research in general. It would be a beautiful example of whole-hearted co-operation among scientific groups of different nationalities. It should set a charming example for the rest of the world. But members of the staff, arranging this swift block of possible trouble-making by unwelcome visitors, wore the unpleasant expression of people who are preparing to be very polite to people attempting to put something over on them. It was notable that the few sporting weapons at the base were passed out to those who could use them most effectively if the need arose.

The transport's fuel-tanks were topped. The remaining two children struggled into flying garments. The boy Hod took down the small tripod with its spinning thing on top. Instantly the area about the base main building became bitter cold. The children climbed into the transport after Gail.

Soames, swearing, climbed in after a still expostulating Captain Moggs. He did not like the idea of leaving while any chance of trouble stayed behind. But as a matter of fact, his leaving with the others removed nearly the last chance of it.

* * * * *

It was, though, the rational thing to do.

Representatives of the other nations would land at the American base, and assure themselves that there were no extraterrestrials in hiding nor any signs of a spaceship anywhere about. And there would result a scientific conference that would do some good. The extraordinary burst of static would be discussed, with no conclusion whatever. But the Americans would be able to make an agreement on methods of observation with the other bases so that observations in the future would yield a little more information than had been secured before.

Gail kept a quasi-maternal eye on the children until they dozed off. But she watched Soames' expression, too. She and Soames and Captain Moggs rode in the passenger section of the transport a few seats behind the children.

"I wish I could understand," said Gail, in a low tone to Soames. "The other children know everything I've taught Zani, and there's been no way for them to know! They know things they weren't in the room to learn, and Zani didn't have time to tell them! Yet it doesn't seem like telepathy. If they were telepaths they could exchange thoughts without speaking. But they chatter all the time!"

"If they'd been telepaths," said Soames, "they'd have known I was going to burn their signalling apparatus. They could have stopped me, or tried to, anyhow."

* * * * *

Captain Moggs had paid no attention. Now she asked, "Why does the public insist on details of matters the military think should be kept secret?"

"Because," said Gail briefly, "it's the public that gets drowned by a tidal wave or killed by a cyclone. If strangers from space discover Earth, it's the public that will suffer."

"But," said Captain Moggs querulously, "it is necessary for this to be kept secret!"

"Unfortunately," said Soames. "The story broke before that decision was made."

He thought how inevitable it was that everybody should see the situation from their own viewpoint only. Captain Moggs from the military; Gail had a newspaper-woman's angle tempered with feminine compassion. And he was fascinated by the innumerable possibilities the technology of the children's race suggested. He yearned for a few days alone with some low-temperature apparatus. The hand-tool of Fran's bothered him.

He told Gail.

"What has low temperature to do?" she asked.

"They've got some wire that's a superconductor at room temperature. We can't have superconductors above 18° Kelvin, which is colder than liquid hydrogen.

But a superconductor acts like a magnetic shield, no, not exactly. But you can't touch a magnet to one. Induced currents in the superconductor fight its approach. I'd like to know what happens to the magnetic field. Does it cancel, or bounce, or what? Could it, for instance, be focussed?"

"I don't see ..."

"Neither do I," said Soames. "But I've got a hunch that the little pocket gadget Fran carries has some superconductor in it. I think I could make something that wouldn't be his instrument, at all—it would do different things—but that gadget does suggest some possibilities I fairly ache to try out."

"And I," said Gail, with a faint smile, "I want to try to write something that nobody would print. I'd like to write the real story as I see it, the children from a viewpoint nobody will want to see."

He looked at her, puzzled.

"My syndicate wants a story about the children that nobody will have to think about. No recognition of a problem in plain decency with the children considered as human as they are, but just a story that everybody could read without thinking anything but what they wanted to. They're nice children. Somebody raised them very well. But with most people nowadays thinking that if children aren't ill-bred they're frustrated...."

She made a helpless gesture as the plane bellowed onward.

* * * * *

Presently the moon shone on Fran's face. He moved in his sleep. After a little he opened his eyes and gasped a little. He looked startledly around, an instinct of anyone waking in a strange place. Then he turned back. He saw the moon.

He uttered a little cry. His face worked. He stared at the misshapen, incompletely round companion of Earth as if its appearance had some extraordinary, horrifying meaning for him. His hands clenched.

Behind him, Gail whispered:

"Brad! He's—horrified! Does that mean that he and the other children need to signal to someone ..."

"I doubt it very much," said Soames. "If his parents and companions had landed on the moon, and I stopped him from signalling to them, he might look hopefully at it, or longingly, but not the way he does."

Fran touched the other boy, Hod. Hod waked, and Fran spoke to him in an urgent whisper. Hod jerked his head about and stared at the moon as Fran had done. He made a little whimpering noise. Then Mal made a bubbling sound, as from a bad dream. She waked. Then Zani roused and began to ask what was obviously a question, and stopped short. They spoke to each other in hushed voices in that unintelligible language of theirs.

"I've got an idea," said Soames in a flat, unbelieving tone. "Let's see."

Soames went forward and into the pilot's compartment. He came back with binoculars. He touched Fran on the shoulder and offered them. Fran stared up at him with dazed eyes, not really attending to Soames at all. He looked back at the moon.

He focussed the binoculars. They were excellent glasses. The ring-mountains at the edge of sunshine on the moon were very, very distinct. He could see those tiny speckles of light on the dark side of the terminator which were mountain-tops rising out of darkness into the sunshine. There was Aristarchus and Copernicus and Tycho. There were the vast, featureless "mares,"—those plains of once-liquid lava which had welled out when monstrous missiles the size of counties buried themselves deep in the moon's substance. The moon could be seen as battered; shattered, devastated; destroyed.

Soames touched Fran's shoulder again and showed him how one looked through the binoculars. Fran's hand shook as he took them. He put them to his eyes.

Zani put her hands over her eyes with a little cry. It was as if she tried to shut out the sight that Fran saw. Mal began to cry quietly. Hod made little gasping noises.

Fran lowered the binoculars. He looked at Soames with a terrible hatred in his eyes.

Soames went back to Gail, leaving the binoculars with the children. He found himself sweating.

"When," asked Soames harshly, "were the mountains on the moon made? It's an interesting question. I just got an answer. They were made when there were three-toed horses and many ganoid fishes on the earth."

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"The children knew the moon when it—wasn't the way it is now," he said with some difficulty. "You know what that is! Ring-mountains sometimes hundreds of miles across, splashings of stone from the impact of asteroids and moonlets and islands of rock and metal falling from the sky. The mares are where the moon's crust was punctured and lava poured out. The streaks are where up-flung stuff was thrown hundreds of miles!

"It was a guess," said Soames. "But it's not a guess any longer. There was a Fifth Planet, and it either exploded or was blown to bits, heaven knows how! But the moon was bombarded by the wreckage, and so was Earth! Mountain-ranges fell from the sky right here on this world, too. There was destruction on Earth to match that on the moon. Perhaps here and there some place remained undestroyed, an acre here, perhaps a square mile a thousand miles away. Some life survived, and now it's all forgotten. There are rains and winds and frost. Earth's scars wore away through millions of years. We don't even know where the wounds

were! But there were people in those days!

"And they were civilized," continued Soames. "They had superconductors and one-way conductors of heat. They had reached the point where they didn't need fire any more, and they built ships of magnesium alloy. They saw the Fifth Planet when it flew apart. They knew what must happen to Earth with the whole solar system filled with a planet's debris. Earth would be smashed; wrecked; depopulated, made like the moon is now! Maybe they had ships that went to other planets, but not enough to carry all the race. And the only other planets they could use were the inner ones, and they'd be smashed like the Earth and moon? What could they do? There might be one or two survivors here and there, bound to lapse into savagery because they were so few. But where could the civilized race go?"

Gail made an inarticulate sound.

"They might," said Soames in a flat voice, "they might try to go into the future; into the time beyond the catastrophe, when Earth would have healed its wounds. They might send someone ahead to see if it were possible. Yet if they sent one ship first—with everyone left behind doomed to die—if they sent one ship first, it's reasonable that they'd give children the chance of survival. It's even reasonable that they'd send two boys and two girls...."

"They—had a transmitter," Gail said, as if breathing hurt her. "You destroyed it. They meant to signal, not for help as we thought, but for their people to join them. M-maybe now they're hoping to get the material and the power to build another transmitter. Since everything they use is so simple, the boys might have been taught how. They were taught to repair the one they had! They did repair it! Maybe they can make one, and hope we'll help them! They'd have been especially trained...."

"Nice, isn't it?" asked Soames. "They were sent here in some fashion to make a beachhead for the landing of their people. A civilization that's starkly, simply doomed unless it can migrate. No mere conquest, with tribute to be paid to it. It has to take over a whole planet! It has to take over Earth, or die!" He winced. "And the kids, now, think of their parents as waiting for mountains to fall upon them from the sky, and I've doomed them to keep on waiting. Now the kids must be hoping desperately that they can get us to give them the means to save everything and everybody they care about, even though we're destroyed in the process! Isn't it pretty?

"If anybody else finds out what we know, the children will be hated as nobody was ever hated before. They'll be known for the deadly danger they are. We're primitives, beside their civilization! We'll have to fight, because there's no room for the population of another whole world, here! There's no food for more people! We can't let them come, and they must die if they don't come, and the children must be here to open the way for them to come in hordes.

"The children mustn't be allowed to build anything we don't understand or that might let them open communication with their people. If they try, they'll be trying to serve their own race by destroying this. And they'd have to destroy us and—" his voice was fierce—"I'm not going to let anything happen to you!"

Gail's cheeks were white, but a trace of color came into them then. Yet she looked remorseful as she glanced forward to where the children murmured hopelessly together.

CHAPTER 5

The jet transport got new flight orders while it was in the air over South Carolina. There was a new attitude toward their ship and its occupants among the military men and the political heads of governments. The new attitude was the result of mathematics.

It was the burst of static screaming, three whole seconds long, which made the matter something much more than a thing to maneuver with and make public pronouncements about. In every nation it eventually occurred to somebody to compute the power in that meaningless signal. It was linked with the appearance of the children's ship—which nobody really believed had contained children—and therefore it was artificial. But the power, the energy involved was incredible. The computations went to defense departments and heads of state. They reacted. And in consequence the jet-plane was ordered to change course and head west.

After many hours the transport landed. A hillside rose before it. A vast, grass-covered area lifted up. It was a great door. The transport rolled deliberately into a monstrous, windowless, artificial cavern, and the hillside closed behind it.

This was a base, too, but not like the one at Gissell Bay. The existence of this one would be denied. It was hoped that it would be forever unused for its designed purpose. Soames never saw any part of it that he was not supposed to see. Nobody ever mentioned to him any function it could perform except the hiding of children from a spaceship that happened to have crashed on Antarctica. But he guessed that if atomic war should ever burst on Earth, that rockets rising from this place and others like it would avenge the destruction done to America.

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Presently Gail and the children were installed in a remarkably ordinary small cottage, and Soames frowned. They'd arrived at the village by elevator from a tunnel hundreds of feet underground, but the village in which the cottage stood looked exactly like any other remote and sleepy settlement. Soames began a protest against Gail being so isolated and so much alone. But, unsmilingly, he was shown that there was an electrified fence, with guards, and another a mile beyond, and a third still farther, with watch-posts beyond that. Nobody would intrude upon the village. But from the air it would look perfectly commonplace. There

was no indication at all of shafts from deep underground to what appeared an ordinary country general store. There was no sign of tunnels from the different houses to that merchandising mart.

Soames went off to be assigned other quarters. He wanted to work on some items that had come into his mind during the last hours of the flight. He'd guessed, to Gail, that the children came out of remotest time. There was evidence for it, but it need not be true. So he'd made a test.

When the children had breakfasted he drew on a sketch-pad a diagram of part of the solar system. A dot for the sun, and a circle with a dot on it for Mercury, the innermost planet. Another dot on a circle for Venus, the second world out. A third circle and a dot for Earth and its orbit, and beside the dot indicating Earth he drew a crescent, for the moon. Alongside the dot standing for Mars he drew two crescents, because Mars has two tiny moons.

The children discussed the diagram. Zani ended it with a decisive remark in the language they used. Fran drew a fifth circle, placed a dot to indicate a fifth planet, and put four crescents beside it, then drew a sixth circle with a large dot and drew twelve crescents beside that.

Soames drew a deep breath. The twelve-moon planet was certainly Jupiter, which is now next out from the sun after Mars. The number of moons made it unmistakable. But Fran put a Fifth Planet, with four moons, where now there is only planetary debris, the asteroids.

The diagram quite distinctly proved, to Soames' satisfaction, that the hypothetical Fifth Planet had existed, with four moons, and that the children had come out of time rather than across space. And he was now grimly sure about the reason for the children's coming to Earth of here and now.

Bombardment from space is not unknown. In 1914 there was a meteoric fall in Siberia which knocked down every tree for fifty miles around. A few thousand years earlier, eight or ten, Canon Diablo crater was formed in Colorado by a missile from the heavens which wiped out all life within a thousand-mile radius. Earlier still a much larger crater was formed in Canada, and there are yet traces of an even more remote monster-missile landing in South Africa. The ring-mountain there is largely worn away, but it was many miles across.

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The situation of the children's race amounted to an infinitely speeded-up bombardment instead of a millennial sniping from the sky. The Fifth Planet was newly shattered into bits. Its fragments plunged upon Earth and moon as they had weeks earlier battered Mars, and as fortnights later they would devastate Venus and plunge upon Mercury. Jagged portions of the detonated planet filled the sky of Earth with flames.

The ground shook continuously. With a mad imprecision of timing, mountain-

ranges plummeted out of the sky at utterly unpredictable times and places. Anywhere on Earth, at night-time, living creatures might look upward and see the stars blotted out in irregularly-shaped, swiftly enlarging areas which would grow until there was only blackness overhead. But that could not last. It turned abruptly to white-hot incandescence as the falling enormity touched atmosphere, and crashed down upon them.

No living thing which saw the sky all turned to flame lived to remember it. Not one survived. Obviously! They were turned to wisps of incandescent gas, exploding past the normal limits of Earth's air. Some may have seen such plungings from many miles away and died of the concussion. The ground heaved in great waves which ran terribly in all directions. Vast chasms opened in the soil, and flames as of hell flowed out of them. Seashores were overwhelmed by mountainous tidal waves, caused by cubic miles of seawater turned to steam when islands fell into the ocean at tens of miles per second.

This was what happened to Earth in the time from which the children came. Perhaps their elders had foreseen it in time to take some measures, which would be the children's ship. But that ship had been built very hastily. It could have been begun before the bombardment started, or it could have been completed only near the end, when asteroids already plunged into defenseless Earth and it heaved and writhed in agony.

Humans caught in such a cosmic trap would be in no mood to negotiate or make promises, if any sort of beachhead to the future could be set up. They would pour through and the world of the present must simply dissolve into incoherence. There could be no peace. It was unthinkable.

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The investigation-team from the East arrived to learn from Soames all about the landing of the ship.

He told them, giving them the tape from the wave-guide radar and speaking with strict precision of every event up to the moment of his arrival at Gissell Bay with the children and their artifacts. He did not mention telepathy or time-travel because they seemed so impossible.

When the military men wanted information about instantly available superweapons, he told them that he knew nothing of weapons. They'd have to judge from the gadgets the children had brought. When the public-relations men asked briskly from what other planet or solar system the spaceship had come, and when a search-ship might be expected, looking for the children, he was ironic. He suggested that the children might give that information if asked in the proper language. He didn't know it. But the two physicists were men whose names he knew and respected. They listened to what he said. They'd look at the devices from the ship and then come back and talk to him.

He went back to his brooding. The children had travelled through time. Everything pointed to it, from the meteor-watch radar to the children's reaction at sight of the pock-marked moon and their knowledge that there should have been a Fifth Planet, to which they assigned four moons. It had happened. Positively. But there was one small difficulty. If time-travel were possible, a man travelling about in the past might by some accident kill his grandfather, or his father, in which case he could not be born, and hence could not possibly go back in time. But if he did not go back in time he would be born and could face the possibility of preventing his own existence—if time-travel was possible. But this was impossible, so time-travel was impossible.

On a higher technical level, there is just one law of nature which seems infallibly true, since its latest modification to allow for nuclear energy. It is the law of the conservation of mass and energy. The total of energy and matter taken together in the universe as a whole, cannot change. Matter can be converted to energy and doubtless energy to matter, but the total is fixed for all time and for each instant of time. So, if a ship could move from one time-period to another, it would lessen the total of matter and energy in the time-period it left, and increase the total when—where—where-when it arrived. And this would mean that the law of the conservation of mass and energy was wrong. But it wasn't. It was right.

Soames tried to reconcile what he had to accept with what he knew. He failed. He provisionally conceded that the children's civilization did something which in his frame of reference was impossible. They had other frames of reference than his. He tried to find their frame of reference in something simpler than time-travel. He picked one impossible accomplishment and tried to duplicate it, then to approach it, then to parallel it. He scribbled and diagrammed and scowled and sweated. He had no real hope, of course. But presently he swore abruptly and stared at what he had drawn.

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He'd begun a second set of diagrams when the two physicists of the investigation-team came back. There was a short man and a thin one. They looked dazed.

"They are children," said the thin man in a very thin voice, "and they are human children, and their science makes us ridiculous. They are centuries ahead of us. I could not understand any device they had. I could not imagine how any of them worked."

"It is impossible to talk at a distance," said Soames.

"What do you mean?" asked the thin man, still numb from what he'd seen.

"Sound diminishes as the square of the distance," Soames explained. "You can't make a sound—unless you use a cannon—that can be heard ten miles away. It's impossible to talk at a distance."

"I feel crazy too," said the short man, "but there are telephones."

"It's not talking at a distance. You talk to a microphone at a few inches. Someone listens to a receiver held against his ear. You don't talk to the man, but the microphone. He doesn't listen to you, but a receiver. The effect is the same as talking at a distance, so you ignore the fact that it isn't. I've played a game with the things the children brought. I won it, one game."

Both men listened intently.

"I've been pretending," said Soames, "that I'm a member of the kids' race, cast away like they are on Earth. As a castaway I know that things can be done that the local savages—us—consider impossible. But I need special materials to do them with. My civilization has provided them. They don't exist here. But I refuse to sink to barbarism. Yet I can't reconstruct my civilization. What can I do?"

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The thin physicist suddenly raised his head. The short man looked up.

"I'll take what materials the savages of Earth can supply," said Soames. "I'll settle for an approximation. And in practice, as a castaway in a savage environment, I'll wind up with a civilization which isn't that of the savages, and isn't of my own race, but in some ways is better than either because it's tailored to fit the materials at hand and the environment I'm in."

The short physicist said slowly:

"I think I see what you're driving at. But it's just an idea...."

"I tried it on that one-way heat conductor," said Soames. "I can't duplicate it. But I've designed something that will mean nearly but not quite what their cooking-pot does. Take a look at this."

He spread out the completed diagram of the first thing he'd worked on. It was quite clear. He'd helped design the meteor-watch radar at Gissell Bay, and his use of electronic symbols was normal. There was only one part of the device that he'd needed to sketch in some detail. The thin physicist traced the diagram.

"You've designed a coil with extremely low self-induction—"

"Not low," corrected Soames. "Negative. This has less than no self-induction. It feeds back to instead of fighting an applied current. Put any current in it, and it feeds back to increase the magnetism until it reaches saturation. Then it starts to lose its magnetism and that feeds back a counter-emf which increases the demagnetizing current until it's saturated with opposite polarity. You get an alternating magnet, which doesn't evolve heat because of its magnetic instability, but absorbs heat trying to maintain its stability. This thing will absorb heat from anywhere—the air, water, sunlight or what have you—and give out electric current."

The two scientists stared, and traced the diagram again, and stared at each other.

"It—should!" said the thin man. "It—it has to! This is magnificent! It's more

important than one-way heat conduction! This is ..."

"This is not nearly as convenient as a pot that gets cold on the outside so it can get hot on the inside," observed Soames. "From a castaway's standpoint it's crude. But this is what can happen from two civilizations affecting each other without immediately resorting to murder. You might try it."

The two physicists blinked. Then the short man said uneasily:

"Can we do it?"

The thin man said more feverishly than before:

"Of course! Look at that weather-making thing! We can't duplicate it exactly, but when you think—There's no Hall effect in liquids. Nobody ever tried to find one in ionized gases. But when you think—"

The short man gulped. Then he said:

"You won't change the temperature, and to make an equation—"

They talked to each other, feverishly. They scribbled. They almost babbled in their haste. When the other members of the investigating-team arrived, they had the look of men who walk on clouds.

The military men were not happy. They were empty-handed. They could not even get statistical information from the children.

They had no useful information. Fran's pocket instrument was cryptic, and held no promise as a weapon. They could not hope to duplicate what Soames had called a super-radar. The cooking-pot, if duplicated, might by modification supply power for ships and submarines, or even planes. But there were no weapons. None.

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The public-relations men were frightened. The children's coming must produce a financial panic. All of Earth's civilization was demonstrably out of date. Earth technology was so old-fashioned that instantly its obsolescence was realized, our economic system must fall apart.

Only the two physicists beamed at each other. They'd learned no scientific facts from the children or their equipment, but they'd picked up a trick of thinking from Soames.

By that time it was night. Soames went again to the surprisingly ordinary cottage that Gail occupied with the four children.

"I've had quite a day," said Gail tiredly. "And I'm worried; for the children. For you. For myself. I'm—I'm terrified, Brad!"

He put out his hands. He steadied her. Then, without intending it, he held her close. She did not resist. She cried heart-brokenly on his shoulder from pure nervous strain.

Suddenly Captain Moggs appeared. Gail was immediately composed and remote. But one hand, holding Soames' sleeve, still quivered a little.

"It's dreadful!" said Captain Moggs. "You'll never be able to believe what's happened! The Russians have pictures of the spaceship! The pictures Mr. Soames took! They know everything! They must have gotten the pictures when their planes landed at Gissell Bay! But how?"

* * * * *

Soames could have answered, and quite accurately. Some enterprising member of the Russian scientific team had been left alone in the developing-room at the base.

"They gave copies of the pictures to the UN assembly," wailed Captain Moggs. "All of them! They say they are pictures of the alien ship which landed—and they are—and they say that we Americans took the crew to the United States—which we did—but they say we're now making a treaty with the non-human monsters who came in the ship! They say that we're selling out the rest of humanity! That we're making a bargain to betray the world to horrors out of space, in return for safety for ourselves! They demand that the United Nations take over the ship and its crew."

Soames whistled softly. The charge was just insane enough to be credited. There was no longer a ship, too, and the children were far from monsters. So there was no way to convince anyone that America even made an honest attempt to satisfy or answer the complaint. The matter of the children and their ship had been badly handled. But there was no way to handle it well. The coming of the children was a catastrophe any way you looked at it.

"There was nothing to be done," mourned Captain Moggs, "but state the facts. Our delegation said the ship crashed on landing, and its occupants needed time to recover from the shock and to develop some way to communicate with us. Our delegation said a complete report hadn't even been made to our government, but that one will be prepared and made public immediately."

Gail looked up at Soames in the darkness. He nodded.

"That report," said Soames. "That's us. Particularly you."

"Yes," said Gail confidently. "You write the technical side, and I'll do a human-interest story for the UN that will make everybody love them!"

Soames felt more than usually a scoundrel.

"Hold it," he said unhappily. "It's all right to make the kids attractive, but not too much. Do you remember why?"

Gail stopped short.

"They don't come from a comfortably distant solar system," said Soames, more unhappily still. "They come from Earth, from another time, where there are mountains falling from the sky. And the children's families have to stay right where they are until flaming islands turn their sky to flame and crash down on them to destroy

them. Because we can't let them come here."

Gail stared up at him, and all the life went out of her face.

"Oh, surely!" she said with bitterness. "Surely! That's right! We can't afford it! I don't know about you or the rest of the world, but I'm going to hate myself all the rest of my life!"

CHAPTER 6

Soames, remembering Rex, got two puppies for the children next morning. He was inside the cottage when Captain Moggs turned up. He watched Mal and Hod, outside on the lawn, playing with the two small dogs. Zani sat at a table indoors, drawing. Gail had shown her pictures of cities and provided her with paper and soft pencils. Zani grasped the idea immediately. She drew, without remarkable skill but with a certain pleasing directness. Now she drew a city while Gail hovered near.

"I reported to Washington of your willingness to work on the report, Mr. Soames," said Captain Moggs with gratification. "Your status has been clarified. The papers are on the way here now."

Soames started a little. From where he stood, he could watch Mal and Hod out of a window, and by turning his eyes he could see Zani. She could see nothing that went on where Mal cuddled one puppy, girl-fashion, while Hod played in quite another fashion with the other. The window was behind Zani.

Soames had not been too attentive. He realized it.

"What's that, Captain?"

"Your status is clarified," said Captain Moggs, authoritatively. "You have been appointed a civilian consultant. You had no official status before. The bookkeeping problem was serious. Now you have a civil service status, a rating, an assimilated rank and a security classification."

Soames turned again to watch the children out-of-doors. Fran came around from the back of the cottage. He carried something in his hands. It was a white rabbit. He'd brought it to show Mal and Hod. They put down the puppies and gazed at it in amazement, stroking its fur and talking inaudibly.

Soames looked swiftly at Zani. Her pencil had ceased to make strokes upon the paper. She had the expression of someone watching absorbedly, though her eyes were on the paper before her.

Gail stirred, and Soames made a gesture to her. Puzzled, she came to his side. He said quietly:

"Watch the kids outside and Zani at the same time."

Fran retrieved the rabbit and went away with it, to give it back to its owners. Zani returned to her drawing. The two children outside went back to the puppies.

One small dog sprawled triumphantly over the other with an expression of bland amiability on his face. For no reason at all, he began to chew meditatively on the other puppy's ear. His victim protested with no indignation at all.

* * * * *

Zani, with her back to the scene, giggled to herself. The two children outdoors separated the puppies to play with them again, individually.

"Zani knew," said Soames under his breath. "She knew what the others saw."

"It happens all the time," said Gail in a similar low tone. "I've noticed, since you pointed it out. But they aren't telepaths! They talk to each other constantly. If they were telepaths they wouldn't need to."

Captain Moggs exclaimed. She'd gone to look at Zani's drawing:

"Really, Gail, the child draws very nicely! But do you think she should waste time on pictures like this, when it's so important that she and the others learn English?"

Gail said quietly:

"She's drawing pictures of her own world. That's a city like her people build. I thought it would be a good idea to get such pictures from her."

Gail went to look at the drawing, at which Zani labored with a young girl's complacent absorption in something she knows will be approved by a grown-up when it's done. With a gesture, Gail invited Soames to look. He did.

Zani had drawn the sky-line of a city, but it was an odd one. There were tall buildings, but their walls were draping, catenary curves. There were splendid towers and soaring highways, which leaped across emptiness to magnificent landings. There were groups of structures with no straight line visible anywhere.

"Interesting," said Soames. "That kind of building has been suggested as ultra-modern architecture. They don't have an external steel frame. There's a central mast from which all the floors are hung. They have to be braced by cables, which make catenary curves like suspension-bridges on end."

Zani went on with her drawing. Gail said:

"It isn't fantasy, then. Look at this. It's a—maybe you'll call it a car. Only it looks like a sled. Or maybe a motorcycle."

She showed him a finished sketch. With a childish directness, yet a singular effect of direct observation, Zani had drawn a vehicle. It did not have wheels. It rested on what looked like two short, thick runners like skids.

"This isn't fantasy, either," said Soames. "There've been wheelless vehicles built lately. They're held an inch or so above the ground by columns of air pouring out. They ride on cushions of air. But they have to have perfect highways. It isn't likely that a child would draw them if she hadn't seen them."

In silence, Gail showed other sketches. A man and woman in costumes some-

how related to those the children had worn at the beginning. There was a picture of a group of people.

"Odd," said Soames. "Everybody wears a belt like the children have on now. Everybody. As if it were official."

He glanced at Zani. She wore a belt over American-style young-girl's clothing today. The belt was neither leather nor plastic nor anything that could have a name put to it. It had two round and two square medallions placed two on each side of the fastening, which was not a buckle. The others wore the same. Soames puzzled over it for a moment.

Gail offered him another sheet of paper.

"I'm going to tear this up when you've seen it."

It was a landscape, sketched in with surprisingly bold strokes of the soft pencil. The time was night. Near the bottom of the picture there was a city of the strange, catenary-curve architecture. It was drawn so small, though, that most of the picture was black sky. But there was a blazing light upon the city, and it came from something monstrous and jagged and incandescent and vast, plunging upon the city from the sky, trailing flames behind it.

"And this," said Gail, very quietly.

It was a picture of a crater, a ring-mountain, the scene of the impact of something terrible and huge. It was a chasm with circular, broken rocky walls. There was a fallen tree in the foreground, near the spot from which the sketch seemed to have been made.

"You're right not to show anyone else those drawings," said Soames. "The kids are in a bad enough fix as visitors of a superior race. If it should be realized that they're not here by accident, but somehow to open a way for invasion by the population of a whole planet, well, you can just imagine ..."

* * * * *

Zani giggled suddenly, and he jumped. But her eyes were on the paper before her. Soames glanced out the window. Mal had toppled over, and one of the puppies had climbed valiantly on her back and was pulling with all his tiny might at a puppy-mouthful of her hair. His tail wagged vigorously the while. Hod laughed, and Mal giggled, and inside the cottage Zani—who could not see what had happened—giggled with them.

"She couldn't see it, but she knew what happened," said Soames. "I suspect this place is so top-secret that it's a breach of security to remember it outside. If anybody notices that little trick the kids can do, they'll be suspected of casually inspecting high-secrecy stuff while drawing pictures or playing with little dogs."

* * * * *

Soames returned to his quarters. He set to work upon the highly necessary

task of pretending that he was a castaway from the children's civilization in order to improvise conveniences that as a castaway he'd consider crude, but as an aborigine amazing.

From time to time, though, he wondered sardonically about the public-relations program on the children. He'd prepared a complete report about the ship, telling in detail about its arrival and adding everything he could infer about the civilization that had made it, except its location on the Earth of aeons ago and its imminent doom. Gail had written what she considered the best human-interest story of her life about the children. Neither report was asked for. Nobody knew where either was to be sent. Soames guessed sardonically at a change of policy somewhere.

But the problem justified worry, the simple, relatively insignificant problem of the children here and now, with all thought of flaming skies and upheaved earth put firmly aside.

The children had to be revealed. But the world would automatically assume that the crew of an alien spaceship must be in some fashion monsters. But four nicely raised children? Space-travellers? Spaceships navigated by boys and girls who liked to play with puppies? Such innocuous persons to represent the most deadly danger the modern world had faced?

But they did represent it. There was no way out of the fact. And somehow the facts had to be put across. The public-relations counsellors who had interviewed the children pointed out the means. They got the job.

The advance publicity was thoroughly professional. The spaceship's company was to be revealed in the most stupendous broadcast of all time. For the second time in history, a trans-Atlantic relay patrol would form two relay-channels from North America to Europe. It would reach Japan via the Aleutians and a relay-ship, by wire from Japan to all Asia and—again relayed—to Australia. South Africa would get the coverage by land-wire down the continent from the Pillars of Hercules. The Mediterranean basin, the Near East, Scandinavia, and even Iceland would see the spectacle. Detailed instructions were given to Gail to give to the children.

The very top feminine TV personality of America would serve as hostess, substituting for Gail, who must try to make the children understand. Miss Linda Beach could establish a personal contact with any audience. One had only to watch her to respond to her charm, her wholesomeness, her adroit sincerity. She had sold soap, automobiles, vitamin tablets and dessicated soup. Obviously, she was the perfect saleswoman for the children out of space.

"I hope the professionals know what they're doing," Soames had said to Gail. "I'm a simple soul who'd be inclined to tell the truth without trimmings. It might not be easy, and it might not be comfortable, but it would be fact."

* * * * *

A small fast transport came to get the children and Gail and Soames. It took off.

Soames took a seat beside Fran. He took out a pencil and a pad of paper. He drew a sketch of a boy flying a kite, and added a close-up drawing of the kite. He drew a boy walking on stilts, and a drawing of how stilts were made. Soames hadn't actually seen a boy walking on stilts for years, and it might now be a lost art, but Fran showed interest. Soames drew a bicycle with a boy on it, and then modified the bike into a motorcycle. He hoped his sketches would strike Fran as interesting, if primitive, things a boy might do for his own satisfaction.

Fran was intrigued. Presently he took the pencil and made sketches of his own. A boy with a belt like his rode something which vaguely resembled a sledge or a motorcycle. He made a detailed drawing of a runner. This was an air-sled, such as Zani had pictured in more elaborate form. Fran sketched the air-column generator, and it was utterly simple and a boy of fourteen could make it. After painful scrutiny Soames realized that it was a ram-jet engine which would start itself and operate in still air. In the modern world, it would make gas-turbine engines practical for locomotives and motorcars.

The transport landed. A motorcycle escort surrounded the car with drawn curtains which carried the children from Idlewild into New York. In time the car dived down into the freight entrance of the new Communications Building on 59th Street. Secret Service men had cleared all corridors so the children reached their dressing-rooms unseen.

Linda Beach appeared an hour later and began the rehearsal.

The children gathered the purpose of the thing by watching the monitors. They chattered together, and the girls went pleasantly through what was expected of them. Hod seemed quite numb, and Fran scowled. But he was more gracious when he saw Soames going through similar antics.

The rehearsal ended. There was another long wait. This was to introduce the children—from a totally unknown and superior civilization—to a world which considered them strangers from space, when they were actually from a much more improbable homeland. The world was waiting to see this. Time dragged.

All over the world people were waiting to get a first glimpse of creatures whose coming might mean the end of the world.

Presently it began.

The show, naturally, opened with a tremendous fanfare of trumpets, played from tape.

Then Linda Beach appeared. She introduced Gail and Soames and Captain Moggs.

This broadcast was supposed to be strictly informative. It was, however, produced with the attitude and the technique and the fine professionalism of special-

ists in the area of subconscious selling. So it put its audience—the vast majority of it—into the exact mood of people who surrender themselves to mildly lulling make-believe. When Captain Moggs told of the finding of the ship, her authoritative manner and self-importance made people feel, without regard to their thoughts, that she was an un-funny comedian. The audience remembered with decreasing concern that some interesting monsters were supposed to be in the show later and that they were waiting to see them.

The introduction of the children was a disappointment, but a mild one. When they were produced and identified, the television-watching syndrome was fully developed. There was a feeling, of course, that the show fell down in interest and that it did not live up to its advance publicity. But the television audience is used to that. Its members continued to watch with slightly dulled eyes, listening with partly attentive ears, automatically waiting for a commercial when it could get some beer or an equivalent without missing anything.

Even when tumult and confusion began; when Linda Beach tried to hold the show together in the teeth of uproar behind her, the tranquillized state of the audience continued. When Linda Beach's necklace was snatched from her neck it seemed intended to be funny.

It wasn't until the very end that anything occurred really to break the mood professionally produced shows are designed to achieve. That occurrence startled the viewers out of their semi-comatose state, just as blatant obscenity or intolerable profanity would have done. Linda Beach, in fine sincerity and in tribute to the children, made a statement which was utterly explosive. When the show ended, people all over the world were roused and horrified and enraged.

Only small children, waiting in space-helmets and with ray-guns ready, complained aggrievedly that there hadn't been any monsters. The adults felt that there had been. That there were.

They hated the children with a strictly personal hatred based on panic combined with shame.

CHAPTER 7

Soames' rehearsed part in the broadcast was finished after he and Gail and Captain Moggs had told the story of the finding of the ship. Their narratives were deftly guided by Linda Beach's questions.

Soames wanted to get out of sight. He was sunk in gloom. It was a show instead of what he would have considered a presentation of the facts, though nearly everything said had been factual. He left the studio.

In an uninhabited room he found himself staring out a window, down at the crowd before the Communications Building.

It was a restless crowd, now. The ground-floor plate-glass windows had been

filled with television screens, and those near them could see the broadcast and hear it through out-door loud-speakers. But this crowd was a special one, in that it hadn't gathered to see the broadcast but extraterrestrial monsters, in the flesh or fur or scales or however they might appear. It now knew that the monsters had arrived and there was no chance of seeing them direct. It had been harangued by orators and people who already began to call themselves humanity-firsters. It felt cheated.

There were a large number of teen-agers in the crowd.

At the window, Soames recognized the oddity of the crowd below him. An ordinary, curiosity-seeking crowd would contain a considerable percentage of women. This did not. There were shouting voices which Soames heard faintly. They were orators declaiming assorted emotional opinions about monsters from space, obviously in the belief that they were beyond dispute and needed to be acted on at once. There was competition among these orators. Some had bands of supporters around them to aid their effectiveness by applause and loud agreement. Soames saw, too, at least one hilarious group of college-age boys who might have been organized by a college humor magazine. They waved cardboard signs. "Space-Monsters Go Home!"

The unattended monitor set, placed around some corner in a corridor, gave out an excellently modulated reproduction of the program going on the air. An Italian physicist asked questions about the qualifications of such young children as space navigators. Soames listened abstractedly. He knew unhappily that if the children weren't convincing as visitors from space, they'd be much less plausible in their true roles as fugitives out of time.

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The collegians surged here and there, making a demonstration in favor of mirth. There were also youthful members of less innocuous groups, swaggering, consciously ominous members of organizations known as the Maharajas and the Comets and the Toppers. Members of these groups eyed members of other such groups with challenging, level gazes.

Voices harangued. Collegians attempted to sing what must have seemed to them a deliciously satirical song. But it did not please the non-collegian Maharajas or Comets or the Toppers.

A Russian scientist took over on the broadcast. He had been flown to the United States especially for the occasion. He asked elaborate and carefully loaded questions. They had been prepared as propaganda stumpers by people who in their way were as skilled in public relations as the producers of this show. Linda Beach applied the charm which had sold soap, vitamins, automobiles and dessicated soup. Soames heard the exchanges from the monitor set.

Outside, in the street, a brick suddenly fell among the collegians. More bricks

fell among those engaged in an impromptu meeting of Humanity Firsters. Police whistles blew. A plate-glass window crashed. A collegian suddenly had a bloody face and a flying wedge of Maharajas scornfully cut through the formerly singing group, wielding belts and bludgeons for the honor of having started a riot on 57th Street. They fought past the college crowd and into a band of the Comets. There they found a rumble ready-made. Haranguing orators found themselves jostled. Fights broke out among members of groups which had come to stage demonstrations against extraterrestrials. The fighting spread to individuals.

Police-car sirens wailed. Squad-cars came careening out of uptown-traffic streets and converged on the tumult. The sirens produced violent surgings of the crowd. There was a wild rush in this direction as a siren sounded from that, and then an equally wild rush in another direction still as blazing headlights and a moving howl came from elsewhere. Rushing figures surged against the doors to the lobby of the Communications Building.

Members of the Toppers and the Comets and the Maharajas and other fanatics rushed up the stairs. There was a sign "On the Air" lighted from behind outside the studio in which the world-wide broadcast was in progress. There was a door. They opened it.

The watching world heard the racket as a former Nobel prize-winner's stilted questions about the children were drowned out. This was not a planned invasion. It was a totally chaotic rushing-about of people who'd been half hysterical to start with, who had been crushed in a senselessly swaying mob, had been pushed bodily into a building-lobby jammed past endurance, and escaped into a maze from which they'd blundered into a studio with a broadcast going on. Stagehands and necktie-less persons rushed to throw them out. But the noise grew greater while Linda Beach tried gamely to cover it up.

It was not easy. In fact, it was impossible. One of the Toppers found himself cornered by two stagehands and dashed triumphantly across that sacrosanct space, the area in a camera's field of vision. He raced behind Linda Beach, then smiling pleasantly and talking at the top of her voice to cover the noise behind her. The Topper snatched as he went by. Linda Beach staggered, and her necklace broke, and this particular juvenile delinquent plunged into the crowd by the doorway and wormed his way through to lose himself in the crush outside.

But now the cops from the squad-cars were at work.

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The lobby began to be partially cleared. Fugitives from panic came down into the street where they were commanded to get moving and keep moving. They did.

And Soames arrived at the studio. He'd fought his way there with a sort of white-hot passion, because Gail was where this lunatic mob might trample her.

He raged, and then he saw her standing with precarious composure out of the way of everything.

Fran dragged fiercely at his arm. His eyes burned. He thrust something upon Soames and frantically repeated the one word of his scanty English vocabulary which seemed to fit. The word was, "Try! Try! Try!" He reached around Soames' waist and linked a belt about him.

Soames had the abrupt conviction that he was going mad. He stood, himself, in the studio where the tumult was now almost ended. But he looked up at himself from the level of his own breast. Also he was down in the lobby of the Communications Building, mingling with the thinning mob there, allowing himself to be shepherded out into the street. There he was surrounded by people taller than himself. That part of his awareness reached the open air and moved swiftly westward. That part of him put his hand in his pocket—but Soames had nothing to do with the action—and felt things there. There was a chain with sharp-edged, faceted things on it. There was a belt with shaped metallic objects fastened to it....

"Try!" cried Fran desperately. "Try!"

And suddenly Soames realized. He heard the street-sounds through someone else's ears. He saw the street through someone else's eyes. Simultaneously he saw himself in the studio through someone else's eyes, Fran's. And this explained the behavior of the children with puppies and English lessons and items of information which all of them seemed to know when one knew. The children were not telepathic. They could not read each other's minds. But someone or all of the decorative squares and circles on their belts enabled them to share each other's sense-impressions. They were both broadcasters and receivers of sensory impressions. And therefore it was because Soames had Mal's belt about him that he could see what Fran saw, and hear what Fran heard, and also he saw and heard and felt what an oily-haired member of the Toppers saw and heard and felt with Hod's belt in his pocket beside Linda Beach's necklace, snatched from her neck even before the camera.

But there was no sign that the oily-haired person saw or heard or felt what Soames did. Perhaps because he was not wearing the belt, but only had it crumpled together in his pocket.

"Right!" said Soames harshly. "I'll get it back!"

He plunged toward the studio door. There had been Secret Service men assigned to guard the children. Soames caught one of them by the shoulder.

"The kids have been robbed," he snapped in the Secret Service man's ear. "Secret device! We've got to get it back! I can do it! Come along!"

* * * * *

The Secret Service man instantly followed him. And Soames tore through the scared people still aimlessly wandering about. He plunged down the stairs. A

squad-car cop moved to check his rush, and the Secret Service man panted an identification and a need. The cop abandoned all other matters and followed, too.

Soames needed to close his eyes to see what the Topper saw. He blinked them shut while he ran three paces. The Topper walked, now. He'd been joined by two friends. Soames heard his voice, he even felt the motions of his lips and tongue in speech. He boasted that he'd snatched the beads off Linda Beach's neck, and got a fancy belt one of those funny-dressed kids was wearing.

Half a block. Two more of the Toppers joined the bragging snatcher. They also heard of his grand achievement. The Topper drew his loot partly from his pocket to prove his boast. They looked, and swaggered, and whooped to others of their fellowship.

Soames pelted around a corner, turning it without warning. The Secret Service man and the cop lost a dozen paces. Soames raced ahead. There was a cluster of late-teen-age boys on the sidewalk of Eighth Avenue. They wanted to see the loot.

Soames plunged into them. Without a word, he tackled and bore to the ground the one in whose pocket Hod's belt and Linda Beach's necklace still reposed.

Their reaction was instant. The Toppers were in a close group. Soames hit it and fell to the ground atop one of their number. The others instantly attacked him as if by reflex action. They stamped and kicked viciously.

But there was a cop and a Secret Service man on the way. They struck. The Toppers turned to fight and fled instead at the sight of two adults already administering punishment to those within reach and coming on to reach others.

The two officers pulled Soames to his feet. In seconds he'd been badly battered. He pulled Hod's belt out from the pocket of the snarling, now-pallid member of the Toppers, who was half-strangled and shaken. He got the necklace. Numbly, he felt again and found a stray stone or two.

"All right," he said thickly. "I got it. I'll get back to the kids with it."

* * * * *

The cop took the Topper. Soames and the Secret Service man got back to the studio. The show was still on. Soames exhaustedly handed Hod his belt, and stripped off the other belt that Fran had put on him. He gave it back to Fran. Fran's eyes still burned, but he regarded Soames with definite respect. Perhaps there was even liking. And Soames held up the recovered necklace for Linda Beach to see, though she was then still before the camera.

She was a seasoned performer. Without blinking an eye she changed what she was saying, called on Gail to have the children demonstrate the devices they'd brought from the wrecked ship, and came to Soames. She counted the stones swiftly, and asked questions.

He told her. It would come out, necessarily. The children had, built into their belts, devices which produced an effect on the order of telepathy. But it was not telepathy. Undoubtedly the devices could be turned on or off. Turned on, they linked together the senses of those who wore them, not the minds, but the senses. Each saw what the others saw, and heard what the others heard, and felt with the rest. But thoughts were not shared. Such a device would not be confusing if one were used to it, and two men working together could co-operate with a thousand times the effectiveness of men without them. Children playing together could have a degree of companionship otherwise impossible. And four children upon a desperate voyage, without adults to reassure them, would need this close linkage with their fellows. It would give them courage. They could be more resolute.

Linda Beach went back to camera-position and waited until the demonstration of the pocket metal-cutting device, by Fran, was ended. Then she signalled for her own camera and definitely put on the charm. She showed the necklace. She said it had been stolen. She said that the children were telepaths, and by the reading of the criminal's mind he had been tracked down through the crowded streets outside the studio, and her necklace recovered.

It is always better to say something that is not quite the truth but is perfectly understandable than something which is true but bewildering. This is a cardinal rule in television. Never bewilder your audience! So Linda Beach did not bewilder her audience by accurate statement. She told them something they would understand. It made the children convincingly more than merely ordinary children.

It shocked her world-wide audience out of that bemused condition the professionalism of the broadcast had produced. It lifted them out of their seats, those who were seated. It tended to lift the hair of the rest, those who realized that monsters from space who could read human minds were utterly invincible and infinitely to be dreaded. No matter what the children looked like, now, they had been declared on an official fact-revealing broadcast to be extraterrestrial monsters who could read human minds!

It raised hell.

Once said, it could not be withdrawn. It could be denied, but it would be believed. In higher echelons of government all over the world it produced such raging hatred of the children and the United States together as made all previous tensions seem love-feasts by comparison. In Russia it was instantly and bitterly believed that all Soviet military secrets were now in process of being plucked from Russian brains and given to the American military. Rage came from helplessness in the face of such an achievement. There could be no way to stop such espionage, and military action would be hopeless if the Americans knew all about it before it was tried. In more tranquil nations there was deep uneasiness, and in

some there was terror. And everywhere that men hated or stole or schemed—which was everywhere—the belief that everybody's secrets were open to the children filled men with rage.

Of all public-relations enterprises in human history, the world-wide broadcast about the children was most disastrous.

Soames and Gail could realize the absurdity of the thing, without any hope of stopping or correcting it.

* * * * *

They went swiftly back to the hidden base in the Rockies. Soames stayed to have certain minor injuries attended to. Also he needed to get in touch with the two physicists who had seen the children and known despair, but who now played at being castaways with gratifying results. In part he was needed for endless, harassing consultations with people who wanted urgently to disbelieve everything he said, and managed to hold on to a great deal of doubt.

Meanwhile there came about a sullen and infuriated lessening of international tension. No nation would dare plan a sneak attack on America if it could be known in advance. And nobody dared make threats if the United States could know exactly how much of the threat was genuine.

Captain Moggs flew busily back and forth between the east and the hidden missile base to which the children had been returned. She informed Soames that the decorated belts had been taken away from the children. One of them had been opened up and the round and square medallions on it examined. One decoration was undoubtedly the case for the sensory-linkage apparatus. There was a way to turn it on and off. It contained a couple of eccentrically shaped bits of metal. That was all. Duplicated, the duplicates did nothing whatever. The other medallions seemed to contain apparatus for purposes yet unguessed-at. One actually had a minute moving part in it. But what it did was past imagining.

Captain Moggs said authoritatively:

"It will take time but we'll find out what it does. Of course right now all research is concentrated on the telepathic device. It will be developed and before long we will be thoroughly informed about the weapons and the councils of other nations. It will be magnificent! We'll no longer have reason to be apprehensive of attack, and we can evaluate every military situation with absolute precision!"

"Dammit!" snapped Soames. "The gadgets aren't telepathic! They don't transmit thoughts! They only exchange sensory information! And there's no danger of the children finding out anything by telepathy when they can only share the sensations of someone wearing a special device! What would they do with military information if they had it?"

Captain Moggs looked mysterious. She departed, and Soames again cursed bitterly the situation he'd happened to create. But still he did not see how he could

have done otherwise than to destroy the children's high-power signalling device when they would have used it back on Antarctica. Yet he was not happy about the consequences of his act.

* * * * *

He found time to get in touch with the physicists who'd come out to the Rocky Mountain base. They'd found a few others who could put themselves into the mental state of castaways who knew that a given device could be made, and then tried to make something which wasn't it but had some of its properties. In a way it was deliberate self-deception, but it was deliberate to circumvent a natural habit of the educated mind. A trained man almost invariably tries to see what can be done with what he has and knows, instead of imagining what he wants and then trying to make something more or less like it, even if he has to look for the knowledge he will need. It took a particular type of mind to use Soames' trick. It was necessary, for example, to imagine limitations to the operation of a desired device, or one's starting-point became mere fantasy. And nothing could be made from fantasy.

But Soames found frustration rampant even among the men who were most successful with the fantasy-trick. There were new devices. They were triumphs. They were plainly the beginnings of progress of a brand-new kind, not derived wholly from the present, and certainly not imitative of the children's. But the devices couldn't be used. Their existence couldn't be revealed. Because anything of unprecedented design would seem to have been learned from the children, and the United States insisted—truthfully—that so far it had learned nothing from them. But nobody would believe it if a spate of astonishing technological improvements began to appear in the United States.

Dislike of America rose to new heights anyhow. But presently some trace of suspicion began to appear in the actions of the anti-American nations. Before the broadcast, a dirty trick had been prepared against America. It developed and succeeded. It was not discovered until too late. Somebody tried another one. It wasn't anticipated or stopped. A very lively and extremely tempting idea occurred in quarters where the United States was much disliked. But nobody dared quite believe it—yet.

Then Fran disappeared. He vanished as if into thin air. At one moment he was in the heavily guarded surface area over the hidden base in the Rockies. The next moment he was gone. Three separate lines of electrified fence protected the area from intrusion, with sentries and watching-posts besides. But Fran disappeared as if he'd never been. It was not easy to imagine that he'd run away. His English was still very limited. His ignorance of American ways was abysmal. He couldn't hope to hide and find food while accomplishing anything at all. On the other hand, for him to have been kidnapped out of the top-secret base was unthinkable. Yet if he had ...

Soames got transportation to the Rocky Mountain installation.

He was shocked when he saw Gail.

CHAPTER 8

She smiled faintly in the darkness after they'd paused on the way to the cottage, and after Soames had released her.

"When this is all over, we'll have our life together, you know that, don't you?"

"I'm glad," she said quietly, "that you feel the way you do. I'm thinner. I'm not very pretty just now. But it's because I'm worried, Brad."

He muttered angrily. He felt that infuriated rage which was appropriate because something worried Gail.

"I told the children you were coming," Gail added. "I think they'll be glad to see you. I've an idea Fran especially liked you, Brad."

"No word of him?"

"N-no," said Gail in an odd tone.

"Did he run away?" demanded Soames. They were walking through a soft-warm dusk toward the cottage where Gail stayed with the children.

Gail said in a low tone:

"Careful! The idea of telepathy is alarming. Everything's overheard, Brad. The children are watched every second. I even think there are microphones...."

Soames scowled.

"It's security," said Gail. "It would be taking too big a gamble to risk that the children can only receive sensory impressions and only through those little devices in their belts. Nobody's been able to make the belt-devices do more than that, but they can't be sure...."

"They took the belts away!" insisted Soames.

"Yes. But it doesn't seem enough. You destroyed their signalling device. But you don't feel safe. They've taken the devices, but they still don't feel sure that the children can't do more.

"And, I thought it was wise to tell Captain Moggs about us. To explain why you might want to come back here. They know I'm rather protective of the children. An explanation for you to come back seemed wise. The children aren't popular since they've been thought able to read minds. So I wanted you to be able to come back without anybody suspecting you of friendly feelings for them."

"I'd have come back on account of you," growled Soames. "So it mustn't appear that anybody wants to be decent to them, eh?" Then he said abruptly, "About Fran...."

"He ran away," said Gail with a hint of defiance. "I'll tell you more later, maybe."

They reached the cottage, and Soames reminded himself that anything he said would very probably be overheard and recorded on tape. They went inside. The boy Hod, and the younger girl Mal lay on their stomachs on the floor, doggedly working at what would be lessons. Zani sat in a chair with a book before her and her hand seemingly shielding her eyes. Her expression was abstracted.

As they entered, Hod made a clicking sound in his throat. Zani put one hand quickly in her pocket and opened her eyes. They had been closed. The book was a prop to hide something.

* * * * *

Soames had a flash of insight. He'd worn a belt with a built-in quasi-telepathic device just once and for the briefest of times. While he wore it, too, he'd been fiercely intent upon the use of it to recover another such device that had been looted in the broadcast studio during the most disastrous of all public-relations enterprises. He'd had no time for experiment; no time to accustom himself to the singular feeling of seeming to inhabit more than one body at a time. He'd had no opportunity to explore the possibilities of the device. But he'd worked out some angles since.

And because of it, he knew intuitively what Zani had been doing when he arrived. With closed eyes, hidden by her hand, she'd been receiving something that came from somewhere else. The two other children had kept silent. Hod clicked his tongue as a warning of Gail's and Soames' approach. And Zani put her hand in her pocket quickly and opened her eyes. She'd put something away. And Soames knew with certainty that she'd been receiving a message from Fran, in the teeth of merciless watching and probably microphonic eavesdropping on every word.

But the children's belt with the sensory-transmitters and receivers had been taken from them.

* * * * *

Little Mal said politely:

"Fran." A pause. "Where is?"

"I'd like to know," Soames told her.

"That's almost the only thing they're ever questioned about, nowadays," said Gail. "As a security measure only Captain Moggs and enlisted personnel without classified information, and the police who're hunting for Fran, are allowed to talk to them."

"Fran's been gone—how long? A week? Over?" Soames scowled. "How can he hide? He knows little English! He doesn't even know how to act so he won't be spotted if he walks down a street!"

Gail said with an odd intonation:

"I'm afraid he's in the wilds somewhere. He won't know how to get food. He'll be in danger from wild animals. I'm terribly afraid for him!"

Soames looked at her sharply.

"How'd he get away?"

"He roamed around, like boys do," said Gail. "He made friends, more or less, with the children of a staff sergeant's family. It was thought there could be no harm in that. And one morning he left here apparently to go and play with them, and they didn't see him, and he hasn't been seen since."

Hod was on his stomach again, doggedly working over a book, murmuring English words as he turned the pages from one picture to another. Mal and Zani looked from the face of Soames to that of Gail, and back again.

"They understand more than they can speak," said Gail.

Soames searched the walls of the room. Gail had said microphones were probable. He looked intently at Zani. He duplicated her position when he'd entered and her actions, the quick movement of her hand to her pocket and the opening of her eyes. She tensed, staring at him. He shook his head warningly and put his finger to his lips.

She caught her breath and looked at him strangely. He settled down to visit. Gail, with the air of someone doing something that did not matter, had the children display their English. Their accent was good. Their vocabularies were small. Soames guessed that Gail drilled them unceasingly in pronunciation so they wouldn't acquire so many words that they could be expected to answer involved questions. It was a way to postpone pressure upon them.

But it was not a good idea for Soames to have too parental or too solicitous an attitude. He said with inner irony:

"I'm disappointed in Fran. He shouldn't have run away. He made some sketches for me, of things boys his age make, at home. I wanted to get more such pictures from him. Hmmm.... Did he leave any sketches around when he disappeared?"

Gail shook her head.

"No. Every scrap of paper the children use is gathered up every night, for study. They don't like it. It disturbs them. Actually, I believe language experts are trying to find out something about their language, but they feel like it's enmity. They're jumpy."

"And with reason," said Soames. He stirred. "I'm disappointed. I'll go talk to the people who're hunting Fran. Walk back with me to the store, Gail?"

Gail rose. Zani stared at Soames. She was pale. He nodded to her again.

Gail and Soames went out into the now fully fallen night. Soames said gruffly:

"We'd better walk closer together.

"When we're married," he said abruptly, "I doubt we'll hide many things from

each other. We'd better start being frank right now. The kids' belts may have been taken away, but they've got sensory-transmission gadgets just the same. Zani was using one when we went in the cottage."

Gail's footsteps faltered. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Give some good advice," said Soames. "Tell the kids you know about it. Point out that the Security people have three of the four belts, and they can wear them and pick up communications. Sooner or later they will and the kids will be caught. If Fran talks aloud they can pick up and identify his voice. If Zani writes, and looks at what she's written so he can read it through her eyes, her hand or her dress in what she sees could identify her. I'm telling you to remind Zani that communication by those sensory transmitters can be overheard. Sooner or later it will be. She must work out ways to avoid being identified. If they think more people of her race have landed, that's all right. But it may be bad if she's caught communicating with Fran."

* * * * *

Gail said nothing for a long time.

"That's—that's all?"

"Just about. I'm Fran's antagonist in one matter only. I'll do anything I can to keep him from calling all his race to come here. I hate it, but I'll do it. Outside of that, I feel that he's here through my fault. I do not want him to be psychologically vivisected by people who want everything he knows, and won't believe there are limits to it. So long as he's at large, there probably won't be frenzied questioning of the others."

"The—things in the belt are very simple," said Gail unsteadily, "and the children were scared and jumpy when they were taken away. So Fran told me, and he'd picked up some scraps of metal. Copper, it was. And I watched for him."

Soames said nothing.

"He took a straw," said Gail, "and used it as a sort of blowpipe. He could direct the flame of a candle I made for him. It would be heat-treatment?"

Soames nodded, in the darkness.

"It would. A pattern of heat-treatment might give a metal all sorts of properties we haven't guessed at." He added sardonically, "And it could be so simple that a boy could remember and do it!"

"He made six communicators," said Gail. "I insisted on six. And then I chose two at random for safety's sake, I suppose. And he and the other children hid theirs. I tried these two. They work. One is for you. Of course."

She fumbled something into his hand. It was tiny; hardly larger than a match.

"You push in the end. It works as long as you push it."

Soames pressed on one end where there was something that felt like the head

of a pin. It probably was. It gave a little, and instantly he saw what Gail saw and felt what she felt, his hand clasping hers. He released the tiny object and again was only himself.

"Turn yours off," he said harshly. "Remind the kids that this sort of thing can be intercepted."

"I'll tell them," said Gail.

"They're much worse off than they were," he told her. "A little while ago all the world wanted to learn from the kids. Now it's afraid they'll learn from it, about the people in it. I think everybody'd be quite willing to forego all possible benefits from their coming, if only something would happen to them."

"But they can't pry into secrets!" protested Gail. "You know they can't read minds! They can't!"

"But they have the reputation and have to suffer for it," said Soames.

They were then very close to the pseudo general store. Gail put her hand lightly on Soames' arm. "Brad, please be careful."

* * * * *

He went into the store. He went through to the stock-room behind, pressed a button, and an elevator door opened in a rather surprising manner. He stepped inside and the elevator lowered him three hundred feet into the earth.

On the way out from the East he'd sunk into gloomy meditation about the situation of the children and for that matter of the world, since their arrival. Fran had an urgent mission he felt he must perform at any risk. He couldn't do it on the missile base.

Fran felt the hatred surrounding all of them from the conclusion of the broadcast. He knew that nobody, anywhere, would help him do something he had to do. So he fled in order to try somehow to send the signal Soames had prevented from beside the wrecked spaceship.

But why must Fran send it? Why hadn't an automatic device been used? Something which could be so ruggedly built that it could not possibly smash....

And suddenly there was an explanation.

Up to this moment Soames had doggedly accepted the idea that the children came out of a past so remote that numbers of years simply had no meaning. The evidence was overwhelming even though the law of the conservation of mass and energy denied the possibility of time-travel. Now, abruptly, Soames saw the infinitely simple answer. Time-travel was possible, provided certain conditions were met. Those conditions would at first instance inevitably produce a monstrous burst of static and an implosion to cause an earth-shock and a concussion wave audible at eighty miles distance. Once communication between time-frames had been established, however ...

The flight of Fran instantly became something so much more alarming than mere danger to Fran, that there was only one thing Soames could possibly do. He'd said he was not Fran's enemy. But he must do anything to keep Fran from carrying out the mission he'd been sent to accomplish.

So when Soames got out of the elevator from the village store, he went directly to a security officer.

"I'm worried about the boy Fran, who ran away," he observed. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I'd like somebody to tell me!" said the security officer morbidly. "If he ran, he had wings on his shoes. And now he's out he's got me scared! You know those telepathic gadgets in the belts the children wore? We took 'em away. We opened one of 'em up, but we left the others in working order. We tried them. When two men wear them, with both turned on, they sort of half-way read each other's minds. Each man knows what the other is doing and seeing. But one man by himself can't do a thing. Two men can do a lot. It's been suggested that if they knew the trick of it, three men could do all the telepathy they wanted, read minds and all that. We haven't found out the trick, though."

* * * * *

Soames nodded, marvelling at the ability of the human race to find reasons to believe anything it wanted to, whether for sweet vanity's sake or for the sake of scaring itself to death.

"When we first got the belts from the kids," pursued the security officer, "we figured there might be some other folks of the kids' race on Earth, figuring on ways to get 'em loose. We had a belt worn night and day. Nothing. So we stopped monitoring. Then this Fran got away and we started monitoring all over again, trying to pick up any working of belts like these that we didn't know about. And we started picking up stuff right away!"

* * * * *

Soames stared. Zani'd been using one such instrument.

"A man's got one of those belts on," said the security man, frowning, "and it's like he didn't. Nothing happens at all. But after maybe hours, maybe a day or two, suddenly, with his eyes closed, he sees a page of outlandish writing. The kind of writing those kids do. It can't be photographed, because it's only inside your head that you see it. You can't make sense of it. The alphabet isn't ours. The words are the language they talk among themselves. I figure there's a ship somewhere, broadcasting a call to the kids. The call's printed. If the kids had their belts on, and turned on, they could read it. But we got their belts. So this Fran, he broke away to try to make some kind of way to answer that call!"

Soames said nothing. But he was unhappily amused, at himself as well as the security officer. He'd gone to some pains to tell Gail how the children might com-

municate with Fran without being caught at it. But they knew. They'd produced this theory of a hovering ship of space, broadcasting to Earth to four children hidden somewhere on it. There was no ship. There was only Fran, desperate to perform the task he'd been sent here to do, keeping in touch with the other three children by a tiny unit he'd made out of scrap copper and a straw and a candle-flame. And it was so natural that the fact wasn't guessed!

"How's he managing to eat?" asked Soames. "He's no money and next to no English, and he doesn't know how to act...."

"He's smart!" said the security officer grimly. "He's hiding by day. At night.... People don't usually tell the cops about a bottle of milk missing from their doorsteps. A grocer doesn't report one loaf of bread missing from the package left in front of his store before daybreak. He'd pick a loaf of bread today, and a bottle of milk tomorrow. Sometimes he'd skip. But we figured it out. We got every town in five hundred miles to check up. Bread-truck drivers asked grocery stores. Any bread missing? Milk-men asked their customers. Has anybody been pinching your milk? We found where he was, in Bluevale, close to the Navajo Dam, you know. We set cops to watch. Almost got him yesterday morning. He was after a loaf of bread. A cop fired five shots at him, but he got away. Dropped the loaf of bread, too."

Soames wanted to be sick. Fran was possibly fourteen years old and desperate because his whole civilization depended on him to save them from the destruction falling out of the sky. He was a fugitive on a strange world.

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Then Soames' mouth went dry as he realized. Fran had been shot at in Bluevale, which was near the Navajo Dam. The Navajo Dam generated almost as much electric power as Niagara.

"I had a hunch," said the security officer with some grimness, "the kid got past three electric fences, and we don't know how. He must know plenty about electricity. So I began to wonder if he might be hoping to answer that broadcast signal with a signal of his own. He was in Bluevale. We checked up. A roofer lost some sheet copper a couple of days ago. Somebody broke in a storehouse and got away with forty or fifty feet of heavy-gauge copper wire. A man'd have stolen the whole roll. It would be only a kid that'd break off as much as he could carry. See?

"He's getting set to make something, and we know he's near Bluevale. He'll need tools. I've got Bluevale crammed with cops and plainclothesmen. That whole town is one big trap for that kid right now. And the cops will shoot! Because we don't know what that kid will make. If those kids had something that'll read your mind, made by grownups, maybe he'll make something that'll burn it out! He looks human, but he came out of space from Godknowswhere. Maybe he'll make deathrays!"

Soames swallowed. He knew what Fran would want to make. A mere local projector of deathrays would be trivial beside the consequences of what Fran was desperately resolved to do for his own people.

He heard himself say something relatively soothing.

"Maybe," he observed, "he's not that dangerous. You're worried about how he passed those electrified fences. He used stilts. He knew about them. They interested him. So he must have made a pair some seven or eight feet high, and learned to walk on them. And then he simply went to a tree near the fence, climbed up it and mounted the stilts, and then walked to the fence and stepped over it. At his age he wouldn't realize the danger. He'd do it and worm his way past watchers.... He could have done that!"

The security officer swore.

"Yes! Dammit, yes! We should've watched him closer."

"I want to get back East," said Soames.

"When do you want to head East?" asked the officer.

"Now," said Soames. "We've got a project started that's more or less linked to the kids' gadgets, even though we don't understand them. The sooner I can get back, the better."

The security officer used the telephone. He found there was a plane due to take off shortly. Soames could get passage on that plane, not to the East, but to a military airfield outside Denver where a cab could be had to take him to the commercial airport to make connections East.

Before starting on this trip he'd suspected that he might need to take part in the search for Fran. He'd cleaned out his bank account and had the cash in his pocket. In half an hour he was on board the outbound plane.

In two hours Soames was in Denver. In three he was lost beyond all discovery. He'd taken an inter-urban bus instead of a plane out of Denver, and gotten off at a tiny town whose name he did not even notice. During the night, with closed eyes and in a silent hotel room in the little town, he pressed one end of the miniature device that Fran had made and Gail had given him.

He felt a queer sensation. He inhabited two bodies at once. It was eerie. The other body did nothing. It only breathed and waited. Someone at the hidden base from which he had come wore one of the children's belts and patiently waited to eavesdrop on any communication that might be made by similar devices.

* * * * *

Soames waited for morning. Very early, again with closed eyes and with his body made comfortable so that he felt no distinct sensation from it, he pressed the end of the miniature instrument. He saw writing of the kind the children used for memoranda about their English lessons. He released the turn-on switch, which

was probably the head of a pin. He turned on a light. He opened a notebook. Its first page showed two sketches. One was of the runner of a boy-made air-sled. Fran had sketched it for Soames on the plane headed for New York and the disastrous broadcast. The other was a sketch of a boy on stilts. Soames had drawn that for Fran. Nobody but Soames would have looked at such drawings for Fran to see through his eyes. They were at once a call and an identification of Soames as a person using a device like a tiny copper firecracker, with the head of a pin where a fuse would belong.

He turned on the device again while looking at the sketches. He felt that he shared the physical sensations of two other bodies, no, three. He was momentarily convinced of a third. All three now kept their eyes tightly closed. All three saw only through his eyes, saw rough sketches which would have meaning only to two. Soames felt that he heard a smothered noise which only he would have known was a suppressed giggle.

Then he felt one of the other bodies shaking hands with itself. That would be Fran, acknowledging the message of the drawings that only Soames would know about. He shook hands with himself for Soames to experience. Then he patted his knee as one would pat a dog, and scratched his knee as one scratches a dog, as he did with Rex on Antarctica. He had identified himself. There was the stirring of another of the bodies with which Soames was linked. That would be the security officer, wearing a belt which brought him these sensations. He could have no idea, however, who was communicating with whom, and pattings and scratchings would have no meaning at all. He could only know that the weird experience stopped when someone shook hands with himself and that was all.

But Soames rose and dressed with many forebodings. Fran would not meet him. Soames had given warning of traps and close hunting. But Fran would not meet him. It looked bad.

He bought a second-hand motorcycle at ten o'clock in the morning. He knew motorcycles. By three in the afternoon he threaded through the traffic of Bluevale. To him, on the watch for such matters, there seemed an unusual preponderance of men on the streets of that small town. Fran wouldn't notice it. Soames did. But he wasn't noticed. He'd bought a leather jacket and a cap. He rode a battered motorbike. He didn't even faintly resemble Fran.

He rode casually through Bluevale and along the wide, smooth highway to the much smaller village of Navajo Dam—at the edge of the big lake the dam had backed up behind it—and then at a leisurely pace along the same highway as it went over the crest of that massive structure. The lake to his right rose within feet of the highway. To the left there was a chasm, with a winding truck-road going down to the generator buildings at the dam's foot.

Soames jittered. He went two miles on and into forest, dragging the motor-

cycle out of sight from the road. He made himself as comfortable as possible, to avoid transmitting any information about his whereabouts. He stuffed his ears to mute the sounds of open country. From four o'clock to eight, at irregular intervals, he turned on the sensory-linkage device for a second or two at a time. He came to recognize the physical sensations of the man who, back in the hidden missile base, wore a child's belt and monitored for sensory communications. Between seven and eight the identity of that man changed. Someone else took the place of the first.

At ten o'clock there was the briefest possible sensation of a third body. Soames knew it was Fran. He shook hands with himself, quickly. Fran would recognize it as a greeting. Soames had contrived a way to offer argument, but he only felt a boy's small, smooth hands shaking each other in reply, and Fran was gone out of communication.

He did not come back.

* * * * *

At midnight Soames got his motorcycle out of the woods and onto the highway. He rode slowly back toward Bluevale. He stopped at a hot-dog stand outside the town and waited there for another signal.

At one, nothing had happened. Soames was close enough to the town to have heard any tumult, certainly any shots.

At two and three—nothing.

At four o'clock, without warning, there was a flash of intolerably vivid blue-green light. It came from the chasm below the Navajo Dam. The lights across the dam's curving crest went out. The street-lights of Bluevale and the little village of Navajo Dam went out. The world went dark, while a mountainous blue-green flame shed intolerably bright light toward the stars.

It went out, too.

Soames, cold with fear, pressed the end of the sensory device. He felt pain, lancing, excruciating pain. He heard Fran's voice gasping hopelessly:

"Try! Try! Try!"

He felt Fran's body turn in pain, and he saw that Fran's eyes looked up at stars, and the stars were cut off at one side by the curving bulk of the monstrous concrete dam.

Soames shook hands with himself. He let go the button. He started the motorcycle. He raced toward the dam. He did not again press on the sensory device until he'd gone frantically through the village and hair-raisingly down the truck-road to the generator buildings. There he cut off the motor, and he heard men's voices, profane and agitated and alarmed. He saw the small flickerings of flashlights.

He found Fran, crumpled on the ground and trying desperately not to make sounds of pain. Soames knew where the hurt was. He'd experienced it as Fran did. He'd guessed its cause and seriousness. He knew he had to move quickly.

He put Fran swiftly on the saddle behind his own on the motorcycle. He gave the motorcycle all the gas it would take and went racketing up the truck-road from the chasm below the dam.

He made it. The motorcycle, its lights turned off, was across the dam and streaking for the first curve beyond before the flickerings of car headlights began to show on the road from Bluevale.

Fran held on fiercely. But presently Soames felt the quiverings behind him. He stopped the motorcycle where the road was empty. Fran ground his teeth and stared at him defiantly in the reflected light of the now functioning single headlight.

"If I were you," said Soames, not expecting to be understood, but speaking as one man to another, "If I were you I wouldn't be ashamed of crying. I feel pretty much like it myself, from relief that your signalling device blew out."

CHAPTER 9

The color of the blue-green flame which had flared so fiercely outside the generator-buildings was no mystery at all. It was the color of vaporized copper, the same coloring found in burning driftwood in which copper nails have rusted. Its cause was no mystery, either. There'd been a gigantic short-circuit where the main power-leads left the dynamo-rooms to connect with cross-country power lines.

Soames and Fran knew directly, and some few security officers guessed, that Fran had caused the short. There was melted-down, cryptic metal below the place where the short appeared. Fran had undoubtedly placed it. How he escaped electrocution the security officers did not try to figure out. But they knew he'd tried to do something with apparatus that burned itself out without operating, and that he'd tumbled down a ten-foot drop while fleeing from the searing green arc, and even that he'd appealed for help with the words, "Try! Try! Try!" And they knew that somebody had helped him get away from the scene of his exploit and injury. But they didn't know how, nor that it was Soames.

Soames was assumed to be on his way East to confer with a group of scientists who now had added certain skilled instrument-makers to their number and triumphantly worked themselves to twitching exhaustion.

Fran's part in the affair was naturally a secret. Lights and power in five Colorado counties went off and stayed off. Local newspapers printed indignant editorials.

Theirs was a strictly local view. In high official quarters the feeling was quite

different. The reaction there was more like paralyzed horror. Fran was known to be behind the breakdown of the plant. He'd caused it by trying to tap its lines for a monstrous amount of power. He'd been trying to signal to so great a distance that tens of thousands of kilowatts were required. He'd failed, but the high brass knew with absolute certainty that he'd tried to signal to his own race. And to the high brass this meant that he'd tried to summon a space-fleet with invincible weapons to the conquest of Earth.

So there were two directives from the highest possible policy-making levels. First, Fran must be caught at any cost in effort, time, money, and man-power. Second, the rest of the world must not know that one of the four spaceship's crew members was at large.

So the hunt for Fran intensified to a merciless degree.

Soames headed north. He wore a leather jacket, and he rode a battered, second-hand motorcycle, and on the saddle behind him an obvious kid brother rode, leather-jacketed as Soames was, capped as he was, scowling as Soames did, and in all ways imitating his elder. Which was so familiar a sight that nobody noticed Fran at all. He was visibly a tough younger brother of the kind of young man who goes in for battered motorcycles because he can't afford anything better. Naturally no one suspected him of being a telepathic monster, a creature of space, or the object of a desperate search.

* * * * *

It was helpful that Soames was not missed at first and was not searched for. It was a full day after the Navajo Dam breakdown before anybody thought to have him check on the melted-down apparatus. It was two days before anybody was concerned about him, and three before flights out of Denver had been checked futilely for his name.

But on the fourth day after a green flame reached up toward the sky, Soames and a silent, scowling, supposed younger brother occupied a fishing-shack on the shores of Calumet Lake. They were seven hundred miles from Denver, and the way they'd come was much longer than that. They were far removed from the tumult of the world. They'd made bivouacs in the open on the journey, and this would be the first time they'd settled anywhere long enough to take stock.

"Now," said Soames, as sunset-colorings filled the sky beyond the lake's farther edge, "now we figure out what we're going to do. We ought to be able to do something, though I don't yet know what. And first we act the parts we're playing. We came here to catch some fish. You shouldn't be able to wait. So we go out and catch fish for our dinner."

He led the way to a tiny wharf where a small boat lay tied. He carried fishing-rods and bait.

He untied the boat and rowed out to the middle of the lake. He surveyed his

surroundings and dropped anchor. He baited a hook, with Fran watching intently.

Soames handed him the rod. Fran waited. He imitated Soames' actions when Soames began to fish. He watched his line as closely as the deepening dusk permitted.

"Hmmm," said Soames. "Your ankle's doing all right. Lucky it was a wrench instead of a break or a sprain. Four days of riding and no walking have fixed it pretty well. It's fairly certain nobody knows where you are, too. But where do we go from here?"

Fran listened.

"You came out of time," said Soames vexedly. "But time-travel can't be done. The natural law of the conservation of matter and energy requires that the total of substance and force in the cosmos, taken together, be the same at each instant that it was in the instant before and the one after. It's self-evident. That rules out travelling in time."

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He jerked at his fishing-rod. He did not hook his fish.

"I don't think you understand me," he observed.

"No," said Fran matter of factly.

"It doesn't matter," Soames told him. "I'm saying that you can't put a gallon of water in a full keg of wine. And you can't, unless you draw off wine as fast as you add water. Unless you exchange. So you can't shift an object from time-frame A to time-frame B without shifting a corresponding amount of matter and energy from time-frame B to time-frame A. Unless you keep the amount of matter and energy unchanged in each. Unless you exchange. So you came to here and now from there and then—your home time-frame, let's say—by a process of swapping. By transposition. By replacement. Transposition's the best word. The effect was time-travel but the process wasn't, like a telephone has the effect of talking at a distance but the method is distinctly something else."

Fran jerked his fishing-rod. A nine-inch lake-trout flapped in the boat's bottom.

"I'm supposed to be teaching you how to fish!" said Soames.

He watched as Fran rather gingerly extracted the hook and rebaited as he'd seen Soames do.

Soames continued, "Your ship was transposed from your time into mine. Simultaneously, gram molecular weight for gram molecular weight, something had to be transposed into yours. Since you were to come into my time twenty thousand feet high and there was nothing else handy to be transposed into your time—why—air had to leave here and turn up there. To make up the mass and energy of your ship and you and the other children."

As if to indicate that he listened, Fran said:

"Zani, Mal and Hod."

"Right!" Soames jerked his rod and brought up a fingerling which he silently unhooked and threw back overboard. "Considering the thinness of the air where you came out, maybe half a cubic mile of it had to transpose into your time to let your ship come into this."

He dropped the line overboard again.

"Which means that there was an implosion of anywhere from a quarter to half a cubic mile of vacuum. It made an earth-shock and a concussion wave, and it battered your ship until it went out of control. It would seem to make sense that the tumult and the shouting would appear here, where plain force was operating without much guidance, but not in your time where the machinery and the controls were operating. Your people had to handle more energy there—and consequently acted upon more energy here—than my people could produce with all the engines now on Earth hooked together."

He fished, frowning thoughtfully.

"I suspect," said Soames, after a long interval, "that with machinery and controls at this end as well as the other, instead of at one end only, that time-transposition would be a fairly tranquil process. It would be under accurate control. It'd probably need infinitely less power. A ship would vanish from your time and simultaneously a mass-and-energy equivalent would take its place. And a ship would appear in this time and simultaneously a mass-and-energy equivalent would vanish to appear in your time. But I think it must have been because the whole business was done from one end that the business was so spectacular, with lightning, earthquake, and all the rest. With equipment at both ends, there should be no static, no earth-shock, no concussion, nothing but a very peaceful transfer."

Soames' expression became sardonic.

"Which I am prepared to prevent at any cost," he added. "Yet I've some responsibility to you, Fran. I think I'm getting an idea of a kind of bluff that we might pull off, if we could get the other kids safe away. It would be a bluff, and the biggest in history. But we might just get away with it...."

Fran caught a three-quarter-pound lake-trout. Soames caught one weighing half a pound. They caught two smaller ones before full darkness fell. Then Soames put up his fishing-rod and picked up the oars. He began to row toward the shore.

"I'll show you how to clean and cook the fish," he observed. "I think you'll like the flavor."

He pulled hard on one oar, and swung the boat around, and caught one of the small piles of the wharf. Fran climbed up and Soames handed him the fish.

He followed Fran shoreward toward the rickety little week-end cottage he'd

rented. There he showed Fran how fish with scales are cleaned, and then how they can be cooked over an open fire.

* * * * *

After Fran had gone to bed, it occurred to Soames that he hadn't heard the news of the world for four days. On the run, as he and Fran had been, they hadn't seen a newspaper or heard a news broadcast. Now Soames turned on the small radio that went with the fishing cottage, to give advance information on the weather.

News came on immediately. It was all bad.

The United States had shown no signs of having profited by the telepathic powers of Fran and his companions. No spies were seized. A submarine installation that could lob missiles into New York from the edge of the hundred-fathom line was not depth-bombed. There were other failures to act on information obtained through the children. No nation could imagine another allowing spies to operate if it could detect them.

So a raging guess began to spread among the anti-American peoples of the world. The guess was that the broadcast was a lie. Nobody doubted the landing of a spaceship, of course. The static and the earth-shock were evidence, and the Russians had photographs. But the children were too suspiciously like human children. They could be child actors, coached to impersonate aliens who could not be produced. And there was an easy answer to the question of why the true aliens weren't revealed. They could be dead. Earth's atmosphere might be fatal to them. They could have died of some infection against which they had no defense.

The politicians and the rulers of the world suspected the United States of bad faith and trickery. They were not certain. But there were ways of making sure.

When Soames tuned in to the news at Calumet Lake, the United States had been forced to use a veto in the United Nations for the first time. A resolution passed, calling on the United States to turn over "the crew of an extraterrestrial space vessel" to a committee to be appointed by the UN assembly. The United States vetoed it. Ironically, with Fran run away and not found again, the United States could not have complied with the resolution in any case.

But the veto lent plausibility to suspicions. There was intensified distrust. The Nato countries asked to share in technical information obtained from outer space. There wasn't any. They asked to study the devices salvaged by the children. This could have been done, but recent political developments inside Nato made it certain that anything one particular nation learned would immediately be known to Russia. This was to be avoided if possible.

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The mess went farther. South America was so deeply suspicious of the colossus of the north that various Latin nations sought engagements by European countries to defend them against aggression by the United States. There had been two

great concentrations of military power on Earth. Russia headed one group of nations, and the United States the other. Now it looked like there would soon be three. Russia would head one. A second would be a group detached from the United States. The third would be the United States standing alone.

It was an absolutely perfect set-up for flaming total war to be begun at any instant.

The news Soames picked up on a cheap radio on a Calumet Lake fishing shack was enough to make any man heartsick.

When Fran waked in the morning, an unsmiling Soames greeted him.

"We're going to ride again, Fran. I'm going to make a long-distance call."

* * * * *

They rode two hundred miles before noon, and Soames got silver from a filling-station where he bought gas. At one of the out-of-door phone-booths lately a part of the American scene, he put through a call to New York. He got the tall physicist who'd come West to the hidden missile base.

"This is Soames," he said very distinctly. "I've got a tip for you. Pretend that you want to make something like the gadget that stops winds and warms places. You know the thing."

The tall physicist's voice babbled.

"I know!" said Soames bitterly, "I'm supposed to be dead or a traitor or something. But listen to me! You're a castaway and savages snipe at you. You want to make something like the thing that stops wind, but you want it to stop arrows instead. It's quite a job. Perhaps the only useful thing you've got on this savage world is a way to make magnetic fields with minus self-induction. That's got to stop the arrows. You can assume the arrowheads are metal. Do you follow me?"

A pause. Then a tinny voice, singularly calm and astonished at the same time:

"Why—yes! A very interesting approach! In fact, we've got some very surprising results lately. One of them will fit in beautifully! Yes! Beautifully!"

"If you make it designed for large enough areas," said Soames, "you'll know where to use it, and how. And—" Soames' voice was sardonic indeed, "If you do get it, this is one thing that shouldn't be kept secret! Get it broadcast! Get it everywhere! Give it to the Russians and the Greeks and the Chinese and the French and everybody else! Understand? The more who know about it the better."

The tinny voice said:

"We just developed a thing to refine metals in situ.... An induction furnace that sets up the heating field at almost any distance from the elements that handle the power. It will fit in perfectly! Of course! Certainly! This is magnificent, Soames!"

"If you can get it working and in production before hell breaks loose," said Soames, "you may deserve well of the republic."

"Where are you, Soames? We need you on several matters—"

Soames hung up. His call, of course, could be traced. He'd travelled two hundred miles so that tracing it would do no good. He returned to where Fran dangled his legs from the back saddle of the motorbike, and they headed back to Calumet Lake for a few more days of peace and quiet.

CHAPTER 10

Soames made his long-distance call on a Monday, when war seemed likely to come perhaps within hours. All day Monday the tension continued. Traffic jams became the normal thing outside the larger cities, which would be logical targets for long-range missiles. Every means of travel away from the great population centers was loaded far beyond capacity.

On Tuesday afternoon national guard troops had been called out in ten states to keep traffic moving.

At Calumet Lake, however, there was no notable change. Soames and Fran still went fishing. In the boat Fran sometimes shut his eyes and pressed the end of one of the tiny sensory-perception communicators he had made. He turned it on for no longer than a second at a time. If he made contact with one of the other children he was prepared to speak swiftly—so they could hear his voice as he did—to assure them that he was safe and to ask for news of Zani and Mal and Hod, and Gail. He could do it very quickly indeed. Soames had insisted on only instants of communicator-use.

"Maybe those gadgets can be directionally spotted," he said. "Security wants you, Fran. If there's a way to get a directional fix on you, they'll find it! So, make it short!"

On Thursday morning all broadcasts broke off to report that the DEW line of radars across Canada had reported objects in the air moving across the North Pole toward the United States. America clenched its fists and waited for missiles to strike or be blasted by counter-missiles, as fate or chance might determine. Twenty minutes later a correction came. The radar-detected objects had not been missiles, but aircraft flying in formation. They'd changed course and returned to their bases. They were probably foreign fighter-planes patrolling far beyond their usual range.

Soames had held his breath with the rest of the country. He was just beginning to breathe freely again when Fran came running from the week-end-shack. His eyes shone.

"I got—" he swallowed—"Zani. I said"—he swallowed again, "we will come." He added: "Our language."

Soames looked at him sharply.

"Maybe you do read minds. Was anybody listening in? Anybody else beside Zani?"

"Two men," said Fran. "Two. They talked. Fast. English."

"One man would be a monitor," said Soames grimly. "Two means a directional fix. Let's go!"

By that night they were hundreds of miles from Calumet Lake.

The highways were crowded with the people who'd evacuated the cities. The high population of remote places was a protection for Soames and Fran. He worried, though, about Gail, her situation, and that of the three other children, was far from enviable. In the present increasing confusion and tension they were hardly likely to have any improvement in their state.

"I think," Soames told Fran reflectively, "that at night, and with the kind of disorganization that seems to be increasing, you can get away with talking to the kids again. Nobody'll try a parachute drop in these mountains in the darkness." They were then a hundred miles south of Denver. "They couldn't get organized before daybreak, and I doubt that they could block the highways. See if you can make contact, eh? And find out how they're getting along?"

Fran nodded. He moved so that the heat of their fire would not fall on him, to tell that he camped out-of-doors. He found a place to lie down in comfort, so that there would be no distracting sensation. He closed his eyes. Soames saw him press the end of his tiny communicator and release it quickly. After an instant's pause he pressed it again. He held the communicator on for several seconds, half a minute. He released it and sat up.

"You try," he said in a puzzled fashion. "You try!"

Soames closed his eyes. He pressed the little pin-head button at the end of the instrument which was hardly larger than a match-stick. He felt the sensations of another body. That other body opened its eyes. Soames saw who it was, Gail's face was reflected in a mirror. She was pale. Her expression was drawn and harried. But she smiled at her reflection, because she knew Soames would see what she saw.

He spoke, so she'd hear his voice as he did.

"Gail!"

He felt a hand—which was her hand—spill something on a levelled surface before her. It smoothed the spilled stuff. It was face-powder, spread on a dressing-table top. A finger wrote. She looked down at what was written there.

"Help Fran," he read. "You Must!"

* * * * *

He felt her hand swiftly smoothing the message away. Rage swept over him. Instantly he knew what had happened. Fran's escape from Calumet Lake had

proved that he knew that his communications were intercepted and directionally analyzed. Therefore the other children were no longer a means by which he might be trapped. So their communicators had been taken away from them for the second time, and now they were watched with an unceasing closeness. Every glance, every word, every gesture was noted.

"This has to be quick," said Soames coldly, for her to hear. "I would help him, but he'd want to get in touch with his people."

Gail opened her eyes again. Her image in the mirror nodded.

"And if he did," said Soames as coldly as before, "they'd come here and conquer us. And I'd rather that we killed each other off than that the most kindly-disposed of conquerors enslaved us."

He felt her hand again smoothing the spilled face-powder. She wrote in it. He knew what she had written before she dropped her eyes to it. He couldn't believe it. She'd written three words, no, two words and a numeral. Soames felt an almost physical shock. He was incredulous. If this was true ...

Then he felt a hand closed firmly on Gail's shoulder. Captain Moggs spoke, authoritative and stern and reproachful:

"Gail! How could you! You have one of those horrible telepathic things too! This is a very grave matter, Gail!"

Then the contact was broken. Captain Moggs had snatched away Gail's communicator.

Raging, Soames took Fran and left that spot which was undoubtedly pin-pointed by now. As they sped away he tried to consider the meaning of the two words and the numeral which was completely unbelievable at first thought.

* * * * *

Shortly after sunrise he bought a two-day-old newspaper. It was the latest he could find for sale. He rode a certain distance and stopped where the highway made an especially dramatic turn and there was a turn-out for tourists to park in while they admired the view. He stopped there and deliberately read the news affecting war and peace and the children and therefore Gail. At the end he folded the newspaper painstakingly and with careful self-control tore it to bits. Then he said angrily:

"Fran, a question it never occurred to me to ask you before."

He posed the question. Fran could have answered it with two English words and a numeral, and the same words and numeral that Gail had used. But he didn't have the words. Especially, he did not have the number. Fran's way of writing numbers was as complex as the system used in ancient Rome, and Soames had no key. It took a long time to grasp the quantity Fran had in mind. Then Soames had to make sure he had it right.

Then, abruptly, he knew that it was true. He knew why it was true. It increased his anger over the situation and the treatment of Gail and the children.

"According to this paper," he said icily, "my fellow-countrymen have decided to pay a decent respect to the opinions of mankind, and to sell you down the river. They suggest an international UN committee to receive custody of you children. That committee could then set to work on you to find out where you came from, why, and when you are likely to be searched for. Now, you know and so do I that part of what they found out they wouldn't accept. Time-travel is impossible. So when you children told them where you come from they wouldn't believe it. They'd try to pry back behind what they'd consider a lie. They'd use different techniques of inquiry. They'd use inhibition-releasing drugs. They'd ..."

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Fran's expression did not change. Yet it was not passive.

"Which will not happen," said Soames in sudden fury, "except over my dead body! Gail feels the same way. So let's go! We've got to plan a really king-size monkey-wrench to throw into these works!"

He stepped on the motorbike pedal. He swung on down the winding mountain road for the lowlands. He went into a relatively small town. He bought a pup-tent, pliers, a small camp-stove; a camp-lantern; food; blankets; matches.

They went back into the foothills and settled down to the strangest scientific conference in history. The scene of the conference was a remote and strictly improvised encampment by the side of a briskly-flowing trout-stream. They fished. They talked. They drew diagrams at each other.

Fran's English had improved remarkably, but this was a highly technical discussion. It was two days before Soames had the information he needed firmly in his mind. He made a working drawing of what had to be built. He realized that the drawing itself was a simplification of a much more sophisticated original device. It was adapted to be made out of locally available materials. It was what Fran had made and tried at Navajo Dam.

"Which," said Soames, frowning, "proved not to work. You didn't realize the local resources. This thing works, obviously, because a terrifically strong electric field is cut off abruptly and collapses instantly. The original apparatus—the one I burnt—no doubt had a very fine gimmick to break a heavy current flow without making an arc. The trouble at Navajo Dam was that it did arc—and how! That was a mess!"

He paused, considering. Since Soames was not looking at him, Fran regarded him with infinite respect.

"The problem," said Soames, thinking hard, "is a glorified job of turning off an electric light without making a spark at the switch. That's all. It doesn't matter how long the current flows. The thing is that it must stop instantly. So we turn the

whole business inside out.

"Instead of making a terrific steady current and cutting it off, I'm going to start with it not flowing and use a strobe-light pack. Every amateur photographer has one. They give a current of eight hundred amperes and twenty-five hundred volts for the forty-thousandth of a second. The juice doesn't flow long enough to burn anything out. It cuts itself off. There's nothing to maintain an arc.

"The really tricky part," he said uncomfortably, "may be the stealing of a helicopter. But I guess I can manage it."

* * * * *

He left Fran fishing and went down to the nearest town again to buy eccentric items of equipment. Copper foil. Strobe-light packs, two of them. He could use foil instead of large-area heat-dissipating units, because the current would flow so briefly. He would get a terrific current, of course. Two strobe-light packs in series would give him four million watts of power for part of the wink of an eyelid.

When he got back to the camp, Soames called to Fran. "We've got to get to work. I don't think we've got much time. I had hopes of a castaway-gadget coming up, but it hasn't."

He began to assemble the device which would substitute for the larger, heavier, much more massive apparatus he'd destroyed on the Antarctic ice-sheet. The work went swiftly. Soames had re-designed the outfit, and a man can always build a thing of his own design more easily than something from another man's drawings.

Before sunset the thing was done. Fran was very respectful. This apparatus was less than a quarter the size of the one his own people had prepared for the same purpose. And it was self-powered, too; it was independent of outside power-supply.

"I'd like to talk to your people about this," said Soames grimly. "I do think things can be transposed in space, and this should work that way as well as in time. But starting at one end has me stymied."

He abandoned the pup-tent and equipment.

"Either we won't need them," he said, "or we won't be able to use them."

The battered, ancient motorcycle took them into the night. Soames had studied road-maps and he and Fran had discussed in detail the route to Navajo Dam—using stilts to cross electrified fences—from the hidden missile base. Soames was sure that with Fran's help he could find the pseudo-village where Gail and the children remained. It would call for a helicopter. But before that there was a highly necessary operation which would also go best with a helicopter to help. So when they left that pup-tent camp they headed toward a very minor, local airfield where Soames had once landed. It had hangars for half a dozen cheap private planes and for two helicopters used mostly for crop-dusting.

* * * * *

At the airfield Soames laid the motorcycle beside the edge of the clear area, and left Fran with it, to wait. He moved quietly through the darkness toward close-up buildings with no lights anywhere except in one room reserved for a watchman.

Fran waited, breathing fast. He heard night-insects and nothing else. It seemed a horribly long time—before he heard the grinding noise of a motor being cranked. It caught immediately. There was a terrific roaring tumult inside a building. The large door of a hangar tilted and went upward, and a door opened from the watchman's lighted room and he came shouting outside.

The roaring of motors changed. The door of the hangar was quite open. A bellowing thing came moving out, whirling huge black vanes against the sky. It boomed more loudly still, and lifted, and then drifted with seeming clumsiness across the level airfield while the night watchman shouted after it.

* * * * *

Fran turned on the motorcycle headlight as he'd been told, and picked up the apparatus Soames had made to use strobe-light packs in. The 'copter swept toward him, six feet above-ground. It came down and Fran swarmed up into its cabin. Then the motors really thundered and the 'copter climbed for the sky.

Soames drove without lights and headed southward.

A transcontinental highway appeared below. It was plainly marked by the headlights of more than usually heavy traffic on it. He followed that highway.

Fran rode in a sort of stilly rapture. Soames said:

"Not worried, Fran?"

Fran shook his head. Then, boy-like, he turned on the transistor radio to show his nonchalance. A voice spoke. He'd have shifted to music but Soames caught a word or two.

"Hold it!" he commanded. "Put it so I can hear!"

Fran raised the volume and held the small radio so Soames could hear it above the motor-noise.

What he heard, at this moment, was the official United States broadcast announcing the ending of all real menace of atomic attack. By a fortunate freak of fate, somebody in authority realized that it was more important to get the news out than to make a professionalized production of it. So a tired but confident voice said very simply that American technicians seemed to have solved the problem of defense attack by atomic bombs and guided missiles. There had been, the voice said steadily, recent marked improvements in electric induction furnaces. The basic principle of an induction furnace was the evolution of heat in the material it was desired to melt, instead of merely in a container for the stuff that was to be

melted. Within the past four days induction furnaces of a new type had proved able to induce heat in chosen objects up to miles. It had been expected to smelt metal ore in the veins in which it was found, and to make mines yield their product as metal without digging up and puttering with useless rock. But now this apparatus had been combined with radar.

When a radar detected a missile or an enemy plane, the broadcast said carefully, an induction furnace of the new type was turned upon the plane or missile. The effect was exactly that of enclosing the missile in a burning blast-furnace. It melted. The most careful tests assured America, then, that any city protected by radar-controlled remote-induction furnaces was safe against atomic attack and its dread destruction.

And at the time of this broadcast, every major center of population in the United States was already protected by the new defense-system. The cities which had been most vulnerable were now the safest places in the nation. And it was found, added the contented voice, that atomic bombs were not detonated by the induction fields. The induced currents seemed to freeze firing mechanisms. It appeared impossible to design a detonating device which would blow up a bomb before it melted.

The broadcast ended in a matter-of-fact statement that plans for the defense-system had been given to all the allies of the United States, that London was already protected and Paris would be within hours, and that within days the nations which were not allies would be assisted to establish defenses, so that atomic war need not be feared in the future.

Soames listened with an odd expression on his face.

"That," he said, "started out as a gadget for a castaway to stop arrows that savages were sniping at him with. I'm very pleased."

There was no more for him to say. The pleasure he felt, of course, would be the only reward he was likely to get. At the moment he was bent upon an enterprise his fellow-Americans would have regarded with horror.

* * * * *

Far, far below and surrounded by the blackness of tree-covered ground in starlight, there was an irregular shape of brightness. It was miles long. It reflected the stars. It was the flood-control reservoir behind the Polder Dam. There was no power-plant here. This reservoir merely took the place of some hundreds of thousands of acres of timbered-off forest which once had controlled floods more effectively.

Without a word, Soames slanted the 'copter down. Presently it hovered delicately over the dam's crest and at its very center. It touched. The rotor ceased to whirl. The motor stopped. There was a great silence.

Fran scrambled down. Soames swung after him. Together, they set up the de-

vice which was a time-transposition unit, with its complicated small antenna aimed out at the waters of the reservoir.

"I've gambled," said Soames, "that we understand each other. Now you pull the string."

There was a cord which would discharge the strobe-packs through the apparatus itself. The discharge would cease with absolute abruptness. The packs would then recharge themselves from the special batteries included in the device.

Fran pulled the cord.

There was no noise except a small and inadequate "snap." It seemed that nothing happened. But there was suddenly a hole in the surface of the reservoir. It was a large hole.

Something came up out of it. It glittered in ghostly fashion in the starlight. It rose up and up and up. It was a cylinder with a rounded top and a diameter of fifty feet or so. It rose and rose, very deliberately. Then a rounded lower end appeared. It floated in the air.

Fran jerked the cord again. Another hole in the lake. Another round metal thing rising slowly, one would even say peacefully into the starlight. Fran, grinning happily, jerked the cord again and yet again....

There were eight gigantic shining cylinders in the air when he stopped and stood back, his eyes shining. A vast metal thing floated ponderously near. A port opened and a voice called down in the language the children used among themselves. Fran spoke back, remembering to turn on his sensory communicator.

Fran talked briskly as if to himself. But it was standard sensory-communication practice. After a long time he turned to Soames.

"My people say—" a pause—"thank you—" another pause, "and ask for Zani and Mal and Hod."

"Tell them to make a column of themselves and float right here, going up to ten thousand feet or so. Radars will pick them out. Planes will come in the night to see what they are. They'll guess. I doubt very much that they'll attack. Tell your people simply to keep them worried until we come back."

Fran zestfully swarmed back into the helicopter. Soames told him:

"Turn off your communicator. You'll be listened in on. But maybe the monitoring men are having their hair stand on end from the welter of communications from the ships!"

Fran wriggled with excitement as the 'copter rose once more.

* * * * *

Soames had an odd feeling that all this could not be true. But it was, down to the last least detail which had made it thinkable for him to defy all his fellow-men to keep faith with four children whose lives and errand he'd interfered with. The

matter had been a very natural oversight, at first.

Of course Soames had assumed that the children's civilization had been one of very millions of people. A small city cannot establish or maintain a great technological civilization. He had been right. He'd assumed, even, that Fran's people were able to travel between planets. Again he'd been right. But the thing he hadn't thought of was that the development of transposition in time—and transposition in space would come later—wouldn't occur to anybody unless there was absolutely no other possible solution to the problem the Old Race faced. They wouldn't have tried to solve it until the Fifth Planet burst and the doom of the world they lived on was self-evident. They wouldn't have worked at it until they realized that Venus and Mercury were due to be shattered after Earth, just as Mars was bombarded before it.

So the struggle to escape through time was begun in the fifty-ninth minute of the last hour. Cities struggled to build time-ships and get a pioneer vessel through to future time. Asteroids plunged down upon them, wiping them out. Cities struggled on, passing to each other—to the thinning number of those who remained—such solutions to such problems as they developed. But there were fewer and fewer.... The city from which the children came had fallen in ruins from earthshocks, and only a fraction of its population continued frantically to labor on....

But Soames hadn't thought of this. It was Gail who found it out from the children with her. And she'd told Soames that he must help Fran at any cost, and told the reason in two words and a number. Speaking of Fran's people, she'd told Soames,

"Only 2,000 left."

It was true. It checked with the number of ships that came through to modernity. Only two thousand people remained of Fran's race. They could not conquer two billions of humankind. They could not rule them. They could only take refuge among them, and share what knowledge they could with them.

Fran leaned happily against Soames' shoulder. The 'copter swung away from a broad wide valley.

Fran pointed. Two valleys came together here. He, who had come away from the missile base on foot, was an authority on how to get back to it in a helicopter.

The 'copter flew on.

* * * * *

Fran said:

"There!"

And there were small lights, the color of kerosene lamps. But they were not lamps, but electric lights. Soames sent the 'copter sweeping toward the remarkably convincing Rocky Mountain village. The ship barely cleared an electrified

fence, the last of three. But if there were sentries who might have fired on it, they had already heard of the arrival of a fleet of alien spaceships. Nothing so human as a helicopter could be an enemy when an invading fleet from who-knows-where was just reported....

The 'copter settled to ground with a whistling noise. Soames cut off the motors. Then Fran was calling joyously, and Zani squealed from a window, and Hod came tumbling out of a window and Mal popped out of nowhere and came running. There were shouts in the village. Then Gail was coming, also.

"Pile aboard!" commanded Soames. "Your families are here, kids, and they're waiting for you. And, Gail, there's going to be the most thoroughly scared gang at the UN and elsewhere that you ever saw, now that what they think's a space-fleet is actually here! We've been decent to the kids, and they think they haven't, so we'll hold out for authority to argue...."

* * * * *

A door slammed. Fran said happily:

"Let's go!"

Motors boomed. The helicopter lifted. It rushed over the village, bellowing. Tree-branches thrashed violently in the down draught. It swept splendidly away down a valley leading to another valley and under a precipitous cliff and down more valleys. There was a place where eight silvery spacecraft floated composedly above the Earth, with the few survivors of a great civilization peering out, waiting for dawn so they could see a new world, a fresh world healed of all scars, waiting....

Soames pulled Gail to him. "I've got to make friends with these people, Gail!" His voice trembled with excitement. "You see? They've got a wonderful science, but we've got to get to work on it! They need a modern viewpoint! That time-transposing system they've used to save their lives, it's bound to work as a space-transposer too! I've got to work it out with their engineers! We've got to get enough power together to send some sort of miniature transposer out to Centaurus and Aldebaran, and then have regular interstellar transposition routes and a spate of worlds for everybody to move to who feels like it.... Taking what these people have, and adding our stuff to it ... we'll really go places!"

They swept over the reflecting waters which were the reservoir behind the Polder Dam. Fran spoke aloud, for someone somewhere else to hear. He spoke again. He was using his own, home-made sensory communicator. Then he suddenly touched Soames' arm.

"My people say—" pause "you talk for them." He grinned. "Let's go!"

And the 'copter touched solidity and a great silvery cylinder touched very delicately close by, and the children ran, squealing, to be with people they'd feared they would never see again. And Soames and Gail walked a little bit diffidently

toward the same opened, lowered door. There were some rather nice people waiting for them. They'd raised fine children. They needed Soames and Gail to help them make friends.

Somehow it did not occur to Soames that he was the occasion, if not the cause, that on this one day and within hours, the danger of atomic war on Earth was ended, and the human race was headed for the stars instead of annihilation. But it was true. The people of the Old Race, of course, would not try to rule Earth. They were too few. They wouldn't want to go to another planet and be alone. Again they were too few. They were the last survivors of a very magnificent civilization, but they could not maintain it unless they shared it with the people of Earth of now. They could only join the sprawling younger branch of the human race as citizens.

But humans, now, had a new destiny. With Gail close beside him, Soames waited for the greetings of the children and their parents to end. He looked at Gail. Her eyes were shining.

Soames felt very good. It was a perfect solution to the troubles of Earth, both past and future.

The stars were waiting.

THE END